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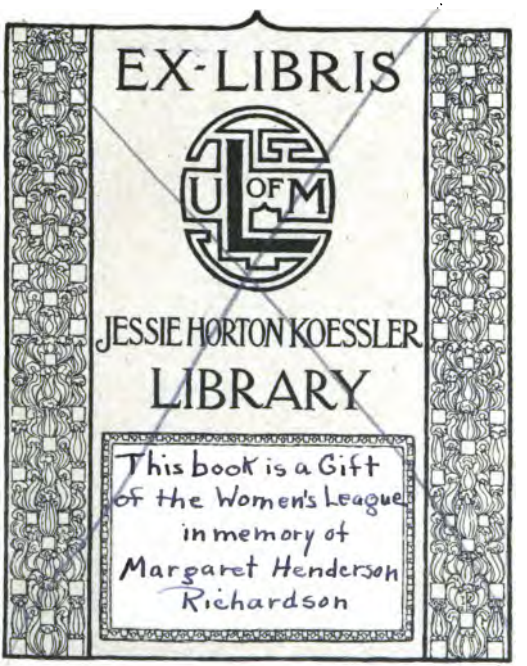

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ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS

BRYANT

The

ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

BY

WILLIAM ASPENWALL BRADLEY

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PREFATORY NOTE

My principal authority for the facts of Bryant's life as I have here presented them is the official biography by his son-in-law, the late Parke Godwin. On the exhaustive material brought together in the two massive volumes of that work I have drawn freely for my own picture of the poet and editor as he appears to us now that nearly a generation has elapsed since his death. Other authorities have also been consulted, such as Mr. John Bigelow's "William Cullen Bryant" in the American Men of Letters series, and General James Grant Wilson's "Bryant and His Friends." Mr. Henry C. Sturges's elaborate Chronology, based upon Mr. Godwin's Life, in the recent Roslyn edition of Bryant's poetical works, has been useful for purposes of reference, as have also his extended Bibliographies in the same volume.

On the critical side I have found valuable suggestions in many places, particularly in Mr. E. C. Stedman's "Poets of America," Mr. Churton Collins's "The Poetry and Poets of America," containing a notable tribute to Bryant by a distinguished English critic, and Mr. G. E. Woodberry's "America in Literature." All three of these works assign Bryant a high place in American literature. On the whole, however, it seems to me that criticism, and especially American criticism, has done him scant justice. Singularly

enough, Poe, himself unappreciated in America, was almost the only critic of Bryant's own time who fully recognized and vindicated his genius. It was France that discovered Poe. Possibly, judging by Mr. Collins's laudation, it may be England that will eventually discover Bryant. Meanwhile, if anything I have written in the following pages should, happily, contribute to his wider acceptance, not merely as the earliest American poet, but as one of the more considerable luminaries of our small constellation — the most imaginative, perhaps, of all our poets save Poe — the purpose of the present volume would be amply fulfilled.

W. A. B.

New York,
March, 1905.

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BRYANT

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

CHAPTER I

A BERKSHIRE BOYHOOD

Of the remote origins of the Bryant family nothing is known, and all that may be surmised is that, from the name which in another form is Briant, and which, so spelled, is said still to be met with in Normandy, the original stock may have been French rather than English. It was from England, however, that the first Bryant, Stephen, came to Massachusetts. He settled in the Plymouth colony about 1632, and seems to have been a man of some local prominence, since he served for a time as town officer in the village of Duxbury. Of his personal history and of that of his descendants in the second and third generations, there are scant records. The latter presumably were a plain farming folk, and representative of the general level of life in the Old Colony, where long after changing conditions had transformed the Puritan settlements on the North Shore into bustling centres of civilization in the New World, the principal occupation among the descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers continued to be agriculture, and the predominant human trait a simple-minded and austere piety which tended to deteriorate into superstition

and mere formal observance. If the early Bryants were in any way distinguished from their fellow-colonists, it was rather by virtue of physical attributes than of intellectual attainments. Of Ichabod Bryant, the third in the line, it is recorded that he was "of such gigantic size and strength that he could place his hands upon the shoulders of any common man and crush him to the earth in spite of his resistance."

Not until we come to the fourth generation do we encounter in the members of the family any personal distinction of a superior order. Dr. Philip Bryant, the son of Ichabod, and the grandfather of the poet, while he did not fall far short of his father in bodily vigour, possessed in addition a real love of books, and was the first of the Bryants to adopt a profession. As a boy he went to study medicine in the office of a Dr. Abiel Howard, of West Bridgewater, whose daughter, Silence, he afterwards married.

This Dr. Howard, who thus became the great-grandfather of the poet, deserves a passing word of mention, inasmuch as he is the first really literary figure in the family history, and as it is to him that Bryant himself attributed his own predispositions to literature. He was a graduate of Harvard College, the first, we are told, in the four Bridgewaters, and before being a physician had studied for the ministry. He loved books, and accumulated what, for the time and locality, was a large library, in which were included many volumes of the poets. He even tried his own hand at writing verses. This poetical aptitude was passed on to several of the children of Philip Bryant and Silence Howard, and Bryant remembered to have seen in his youth a little manuscript volume of their verses written

out in the hand of his father, who continued throughout life to maintain his interest in poetry.

Bryant's father, Peter Bryant, was also a physician. Instead, however, of remaining in Bridgewater, he sought a fresh field for the practice of his profession in the western part of the state. He settled at Cummington, where he married Sarah Snell, who, like himself, was a native of Bridgewater, but whose early years, unlike his own, had been passed in the still sparsely settled hill country of Hampshire County, where her father, following the general westward migratory movement after the Revolution, had established a new home for the family. The Snells, equally with the Bryants, were descended from the oldest Puritan or Pilgrim stock of New England, and on his mother's side Bryant derived his descent on three counts from passengers in the *Mayflower*, once from that illustrious pair, John Alden and Priscilla Mullins, whom another American poet, Longfellow, also numbered among his ancestors.

Dr. Peter Bryant was a man of singularly attractive personality, whose story possesses considerable romantic interest. He had had a more than unusually hard boyhood, even for one brought up in those days on a New England farm, a boyhood in which poverty and want of sympathy coöperated to bring a blight upon early ambitions. He acquired with difficulty, and mainly by his own efforts, sufficient preparation to enter Harvard College, where, however, the slender means of the family did not permit him to remain. Returning to the farm, he commenced the study of medicine in his father's office. Later he received instruction from Laprilète, a famous French physi-

cian and an exile from the West Indies, and attended some lectures at Harvard. After helping his father awhile with his practice, he went, as we have seen, to Cummington, where he met and married "sweet Sallie Snell," as he called her in his verses. One year after the birth of his second son, the poet, he embarked as a surgeon in a merchant vessel, which was detained by the French for more than a year at Mauritius. There he acquired an extensive acquaintance with French hospitals and the French language, and became impressed, as Mr. Parke Godwin, Bryant's biographer, thinks, with that liberal thought which predisposed him to an acceptance of the doctrines of Unitarianism as he later heard them preached in Boston by William Ellery Channing. On the same trip he visited the East Indies and the Cape of Good Hope, and, after suffering shipwreck, returned home to settle down in the quiet ways of a country doctor.

His life henceforth, however, was not without variety of outside interest. He engaged in politics, and for several successive years represented Cummington in the Massachusetts legislature, and later in the state senate. As a surgeon he acquired a more than local reputation for his firm hand and accurate eye, and he instructed many youths in his profession. His high character and scholarly attainments gave this provincial physician easy access to the best and most cultivated society throughout the state, and he was everywhere referred to as the "wise and learned" or "good and learned" Dr. Bryant.

It is obvious, therefore, that the door of the farmhouse at Cummington in which Bryant passed his boyhood opened on a wider world than might have been

expected in so remote and rural a community. It was much for Bryant to have had such a father, who stood in the boy's narrow and secluded experience as the embodiment and living presence of all there was gracious and alluring in the unknown outer world. The boy's impression of this father was carried over into manhood and is preserved in the following passage from the uncompleted autobiography of the poet: —

"My father delighted in poetry, and in his library were the volumes of most of the eminent English poets. He wrote verses himself, mostly humorous and satirical. He was not unskilled in Latin poetry, in which the odes of Horace were his favourites. He was fond of music, played on the violin, and I remember hearing him say that he once made a bass viol — for he was very ingenious in the use of tools — and played upon it. He was of a mild and indulgent temper, somewhat silent — though not hesitating in conversation, and never expatiated at much length on any subject. His patients generally paid him whatever they pleased, if ever so little, so that he could not by any means be called a thriving man. In one respect he did not stint himself; he always dressed well, and with a most scrupulous neatness, his attire being that of a Boston gentleman, and he had a certain metropolitan air. In figure he was square built, with muscular arms and legs, and in his prime was possessed of great strength. He would take up a barrel of cider and lift it into a cart over the wheel — a feat of which he was not unwilling to speak. His life was a laborious one, being obliged to make professional visits to persons living at a distance, often in the most inclement weather. He always made these journeys on horseback."

Bryant has given a companion portrait of his mother which serves equally to indicate the character and spirit of this noble and high-minded woman; though when he speaks of her as a "careful economist"

he gives but a faint idea of the daily burden she bore in ministering to the wants of a large family in a primitive community where all industry was centred in the household: —

"She was tall, of an erect figure, and, until rather late in life, of an uncommonly youthful appearance. She was a person of excellent practical sense, of a quick and sensitive moral judgment, and had no patience with any form of deceit or duplicity. Her prompt condemnation of injustice, even in those instances in which it is tolerated by the world, made a strong impression upon me in early life, and if, in the decision of public questions, I have in my sober age endeavoured to keep in view the great rule of right, without much regard to persons, it has been owing in a good degree to the force of her example, which taught me never to countenance a wrong because others did. My mother was a careful economist, which the circumstances of her family compelled her to be, and by which she made some amends for my father's want of attention to the main chance. She had a habit of keeping a diary, in which the simple occupations of the day and the occurrences in which the family or the neighbourhood had an interest were briefly noted down."

No biography of Bryant would be complete without some reference to his grandfather, Ebenezer Snell, in whose house the poet passed the greater part of his boyhood. He was a good type of the New England farmer, in whose nature Puritanism, with its stern rigours of conduct and conscience, was overlaid with many of the amenities of Yankee humour. He was a prominent man in the community, being both a deacon and a justice of the peace. In religion he was a devout Calvinist, and learned in the literature and dialectics of his sect. He had prayers morning and evening, "such prayers," says Bryant, "as sixty or seventy

years since were in vogue among the descendants of the Pilgrims, who culled from the Hebrew Scriptures the poetical expressions with which they abound, and used them liberally in their devotions." One expression he quotes as having forcibly affected his childish imagination: "Let not our feet stumble on the dark mountains of eternal death." Bryant preserved several anecdotes of his grandfather, one of which may serve to indicate the way in which he exercised his humour, and also to indicate the patriarchal conception of justice that obtained in a remote New England community at the end of the eighteenth century: —

"My grandfather once found that certain pieces of lumber, intended by him for the runners of a sled, and called in that part of the country sled-crooks, had been taken without leave by a farmer living at no great distance. These timbers were valuable, being made from a tree the grain of which was curved so as to correspond with the curve required in the runners. The delinquent received notice that his offence was known, and that, if he wished to escape a prosecution, he must carry a bushel of rye to each of three poor widows living in the neighbourhood, and tell her why he brought it. He was only too glad to comply with this condition."

The community into which Bryant was born, as may be judged from this extract, was very primitive, and presented only moderate social advantages for growing youth. The schools were poor and badly taught and corporal punishment was much in vogue. Entertainments were of a rough and ready sort, such as barn-raisings, maple-sugar-makings, corn-huskings, apple-parings, cider-makings, and the nasal delights of the singing-school. As in most country districts drunkenness was a besetting sin, and many examples were

forced upon the poet's youthful attention. Yet in spite of all this, it was a religious community, an outpost of Puritanism, and the clergy had a wholesome and restraining influence on the manners and morals of the country-side.

For a boy like Bryant, if there was little that was inspiring in the social life of Cummington, there was plenty to occupy his attention and to elevate his mind in the beauty of the surrounding country. Even now this is one of the least frequented and most remote districts of New England, but the combined loveliness and grandeur of its rugged hills, narrow winding valleys, and rushing mountain torrents, rival that of the famous Berkshire region across the Hoosacs. In natural environment no place could have been selected more suitable for the spiritual nurture of one who was to deal freshly for the first time with the aspects of American landscape and to observe and describe the birds and trees and flowers, the skies and atmospheric conditions, peculiar to our northern climate.

Amid such conditions, and of such parentage and ancestry, William Cullen Bryant was born on the 3d of November, 1794. The event is recorded in the following entry in his mother's diary: —

"*Nov.* 3, 1794. — Stormy, wind N.E. Churned. Seven in the evening a son born."

The next entry, made two days later, reads: —

"*Nov.* 5, 1794. — Clear, Wind N.W. Made Austin [the poet's oldest brother] a coat. Sat up all day. Went into the kitchen."

But although the birth of a son caused so little disturbance in the economy of the New England house-

hold, his health from the very first gave great concern to both parents. Bryant was a delicate, sickly child who seemed to have inherited very little of the physical robustness of his father's family. Dr. Bryant's professional skill was taxed to the utmost to carry him through more than one dangerous crisis when his life was despaired of, and when the fear was confided to neighbours that he could not be reared. Pulmonary weakness, that for all the vigour of the stock was hereditary in the Bryant family, early manifested itself. Another cause for anxiety lay in the excessive size of his head, to reduce which to its normal dimensions, it is recorded that early every morning during one summer Dr. Bryant had the three-year-old child taken by some of his medical students and plunged into a spring near the house, "continuing the treatment, in spite of the outcries and protestations of their patient, so late into the autumn as sometimes to break the ice that skimmed the surface."

Along with this physical fragility and abnormality, and a painful nervousness of temperament, there went a marked precocity both of mind and of body. "I was thought," he writes, "to be a precocious child. On my first birthday there is a record that I could already go alone, and . . . when but a few days more than sixteen months old, there is another record, that I knew all the letters of the alphabet." He adds, however, that this precocity was not peculiar to himself, but that his elder brother, Austin, even surpassed him in early accomplishments.

Before his fourth year he was sent to the district school, "but at first, as I infer from the minutes in my mother's diary, not with much regularity. I have no recollection of

any irksomeness in studying my lessons or in the discipline of the school. I only recollect gathering spearmint by the brook in company with my fellow-scholars, taking off my cap at their bidding in a light summer shower, that the rain might fall on my hair and make it grow; and that once I awoke from a sound nap to find myself in the lap of the schoolmistress, and was vexed to be thus treated like a baby."

When Bryant was five, his parents, who had already made several moves in the vicinity, finally settled at the Snell homestead, and his schooling definitely began.

"The education which we received here was of the humblest elementary kind, stopping at grammar, unless we include theology, as learned from the Westminster Catechism, which was our Saturday exercise. I was an excellent, almost an infallible, speller, and ready in geography; but in the Catechism, not understanding the abstract terms, I made but little progress. Our schoolmaster, who for many years was one of our neighbours, named Briggs, a kind and just man, believed in corporal punishment, and carried a birchen twig, with which he admonished those who were idle or at play by a smart stroke over the head. It was somewhat amusing to see the delinquent cringe and writhe as the blow descended, but nobody dared to laugh. I got but few of these reprimands, being generally absorbed in my lessons."

From this ability to find amusement in the punishment of his fellow-students from behind the buttress of his own conscious rectitude, one infers that Bryant was a little of that "smug, smooth, prim and proper prig" whose qualities Christopher North so earnestly deprecates in his *Sporting Jacket;* and the impression is borne out by the anecdote which tells of his

fondness for playing at preaching, a game which consisted in standing on a chair and declaiming the hymns of the pious Dr. Watts, with great edification, no doubt, to the members of the family, who made up his audience. But neither his priggishness nor his precocity, qualities which are so often in alliance, prevented him from playing as a child with other children in a perfectly natural and normal fashion: —

"When the scholars were let out at noon, we amused ourselves with building dams across the rivulet, and launching rafts made of old boards on the collected water; and in winter, with skating on the ice and building snow barricades, which we called forts, and, dividing the boys into two armies, and using snowballs for ammunition, we contended for the possession of these strongholds. I was one of their swiftest runners in the race, and not inexpert at playing ball, but being of a slight frame, I did not distinguish myself in these sieges."

Then follows a passage in the Autobiography that is interesting as showing how impressionable he was, even at an early age, to the sentiments aroused by the spectacle of death: "One of the scholars, a lad older than myself, sickened and died, and I went to his funeral. I well recollect the awe and silence of the occasion and the strangely pallid face of the dead. It was, I think, the first time that I ever looked on such a sight."

No doubt his feelings upon this occasion were coloured by the gloomy sentiments with which the thought of death is invested under Puritanism. Cummington, as Bryant says, was a religious community, and the doctrines of Calvinism were accepted in the Snell household. Dr. Bryant had already become a

convert to the new doctrines of Unitarianism, but the poet's training was left entirely in the hands of the women of the household.

"My mother and grandmother taught me, as soon as I could speak, the Lord's Prayer and other little petitions suited to childhood, and I may be said to have been nurtured on Watts' devout poems composed for children. The prayer of the publican in the New Testament was often in my mouth, and I heard every variety of prayer at the Sunday evening services conducted by laymen in private houses. But I varied in my private devotions from these models in one respect, namely, in supplicating, as I often did, that I might receive the gift of poetic genius, and write verses that might endure. I presented this petition in these early years with great fervour, but after a time I discontinued the practice; I can hardly say why. As a general rule, whatever I might innocently wish, I did not see why I should not ask; and I was a firm believer in the efficacy of prayer. The Calvinistic system of divinity I adopted, of course, as I heard nothing else taught from the pulpit, and supposed it to be the accepted belief of the religious world."

Calvinism, however, struck no deep responsive chord in Bryant's nature; rather he was repelled by its harshness, cruelty and superstition. As soon as he began to think seriously for himself and to learn what others were thinking, he obeyed the natural impulses of his own mind and heart and followed his father in embracing Unitarianism. He never, however, totally outgrew the effects of his Puritan upbringing, and the sentiments which he had unconsciously imbibed from his earliest boyhood continued always to colour his verse with a fervour of moral and religious feeling. Perhaps Bryant's Unitarianism does not differ so much, after all, from the Puritanism of his ancestors. It was the

expression in a new and for the age more vital form of the same old profound belief in spiritual truth, and it principally departed from the elder creed in holding out a greater hope for mankind, in which lies the root of American optimism.

In the passage quoted above Bryant says that he prayed to become a poet. This ambition was formed at a very early time, and in no way did his precocity manifest itself more strikingly than in the age at which he began to write verses: —

"In my ninth year I began to make verses, some of which were utter nonsense. My father ridiculed them, and endeavoured to teach me to write only when I had something to say. A year or two later my grandfather gave me as an exercise the first chapter of the Book of Job to turn into verse. I put the whole of the narrative into heroic couplets, one of which I remember, as the first draught: —

"'His name was Job, evil he did eschew,
To him were born three sons; three daughters too.'

"My father did not allow this doggerel to stand, but I forget what I put in its place. For this task I was rewarded with the small Spanish coin then called a ninepenny piece. I paraphrased afterwards the Hundred and Fourth Psalm. In the spring of 1804, when I was ten years old, I composed a little poem, the subject of which was the description of the school, and which I declaimed on the schoolroom floor. It was afterwards printed in the *Hampshire Gazette*, the county newspaper published at Northampton. Meantime I wrote various lampoons on my school-fellows and others, and when the great eclipse of the sun took place, in June, 1806, I celebrated the event in verse. I remember being told about this time that my father had said, 'He will be ashamed of his poems when he is grown up.' I could not then see why."

Bryant received his immediate incentive to write from the books in his father's library: —

"In the long winter evenings and the stormy winter days I read, with my elder brother, books from my father's library — not a large one, but well chosen. I remember well the delight with which we welcomed the translation of the *Iliad* by Pope, when it was brought into the house. I had met with passages from it before, and thought them the finest verses that ever were written. My brother and myself, in emulation of the ancient heroes, made for ourselves wooden shields, swords and spears, and fashioned old hats in the shape of helmets, with plumes of tow; and in the barn, when nobody observed us, we fought the battles of the Greeks and Trojans over again."

There were other books in the house besides Pope's *Iliad*, among them such classics as Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton, but although the poet was doubtless familiar with all of these, Pope overtopped the rest in interest and influence, so that they need scarcely be considered as having affected his development. It was not till somewhat later, when Dr. Bryant, who, though a devoted admirer of Pope and his school, was of a progressive taste, began to bring home the works of the men who presaged the dawn of the great romantic revival, that Bryant came to lose his liking for the rhymed couplet and the conventionalities of eighteenth-century expression.

Already, indeed, writers like Thomson and Cowper were perhaps beginning to awaken an interest in nature and to unlock springs in his own heart that would begin to flow at the magic call of Wordsworth. It is a reminiscence of this awakening that we find in the later lyric which begins: —

"I cannot forget with what fervid devotion
I worshipped the visions of verse and of fame;
Each gaze at the glories of earth, sky and ocean,
To my kindled emotions, was wind over flame."

There is without doubt an element of idealization in every such expression by a poet, later in life, of the spiritual experiences of his boyhood, and it is not necessary to suppose that nature for Bryant at the time of which we are writing was not primarily a playground, a setting for the sports and pastimes common to all country-bred boys. No doubt, when he and his brother Austin roamed the country-side, it was with such definite ends in view as fishing, nutting and bird-nesting. He himself confesses to having been an ardent angler in his youth, though later, as he came to share in all modern humanitarian sentiments, he abandoned the pastime and doubtless would have agreed with Byron in that poet's abhorrence of the cruelty involved in even so otherwise amiable a manifestation of the sporting spirit. But although it needs the element of recollection to precipitate, in the exciting pleasure of such pursuits, the passionate appreciation of external beauty, it would seem that Bryant did actually, earlier than most boys, because of his peculiar endowment, begin to experience a disinterested devotion to nature for her own sake. While he did not seek her necessarily in solitude, he held, beneath the natural gregariousness and the superficial excitements of youth, a little of the reserve, a little of the secret heart, of the budding poet. He loved nature with the exceptional boy's shy, passionate worship of beauty and with a growing consciousness of her spell upon his spirit. He fed his eyes upon her loveliness and felt rise up within him some response, faint but exultant, to every aspect gracious and sublime which she presented to him.

"I was always," he writes, "from my earliest years a delighted observer of external nature — the splendours of a winter daybreak over the wide waste of moor seen from our windows, the glories of the autumnal woods, the gloomy approaches of the thunderstorm, and its departure amid sunshine and rainbows, the return of spring, with its flowers, and the first snowfall of winter. The poets fostered this taste in me, and though at that time I rarely heard such things spoken of, it was none the less cherished in my secret mind."

He had, too, the sense of ecstasy in mere physical experience, and when in the winter he went to school across the fields, over snow that was firm enough to bear him without breaking the glazed surface, "then," he writes, "the coming and going was a joyous pastime."

It was not, however, the real poet within him, the poet of whose existence he himself was as yet unaware, that found expression in his earliest attempts at verse. These were concerned with things that lay more upon the surface of his ordinary experience.

"In February 1808, General Woodbridge, of Northampton, a place about four miles distant from our dwelling, died. He was a promising and popular lawyer, held in high esteem by the Federal party, to which he belonged, and was much lamented. My father suggested this event as a subject for a monody. I composed one beginning with these lines: —

"'The word is given, the cruel arrow flies,
With death-foreboding aim, and Woodbridge dies.
Lo! Hampshire's genius, bending o'er his bier,
In silent sorrow heaves the sigh sincere;
Loose to the wind her hair dishevelled flies
And falling tear-drops glisten in her eyes,'

The rest of the poem was very much like this. My father read it, and told me it was nothing but tinsel and would not do. There were only four lines among all that I had written which he would allow to be tolerable."

Bryant's father was his mentor and critic and seems to have observed with more or less interest, probably not unassociated with his own early aspirations in the same direction, his son's aptitude for making verses. How seriously he took the boy's ambition to become a poet is uncertain. Bryant quotes him only in such slighting and derogatory criticism as the above. But underlying this apparent unconcern there was doubtless an element of wise parental precaution in seeking to avoid the overstimulation of his son's vanity. On the whole his advice was sound, wholesome and helpful, and Bryant had no reason to regret in later life the influence of the sometimes roughly restraining hand that developed in him very early an appreciation of high standards of good sense and correctness.

And yet curiously enough, in view of Dr. Bryant's prophecy that his son would be ashamed of his verse when he grew up, the only chagrin that Bryant ever experienced in connection with any of his early productions grew out of an act of imprudence on the part of his father, who in one instance allowed his good taste and better judgment to be overridden by his political enthusiasm: —

"About this time [1808]," writes Bryant, "the animosity with which the two political parties — the Federalists and the Republicans, as they called themselves — regarded each other was at its height. There was scarcely anything too bad for each party to say of the other. I read the newspapers of the Federal party, and took a strong interest in political questions. Under Mr. Jefferson's administration, in conse-

quence of our disputes with Great Britain, an embargo was laid in 1807 upon all the ports of our republic which, by putting a stop to all foreign commerce, had a disastrous effect upon many private interests, and embittered the hatred with which the Federalists regarded their political adversaries, and particularly Mr. Jefferson. I had written some satirical lines apostrophizing the President, which my father saw, and thinking well of them, encouraged me to write others in the same vein. This I did willingly, until the additions grew into a poem of several pages, in the midst of which the lines of which I have spoken took their place. The poem was published at Boston in 1808, in a little pamphlet entitled *The Embargo; or Sketches of the Times, A Satire; by a Youth of Thirteen.* It had the honour of being kindly noticed in the *Monthly Anthology*, a literary periodical published in Boston, which quoted from it the passage that had attracted my father's attention: —

"'And thou, the scorn of every patriot name,
Thy country's ruin and thy council's shame!
Poor servile thing! derision of the brave!
Who erst from Tarleton fled to Carter's cave;
Thou, who, when menaced by perfidious Gaul,
Didst prostrate to her whiskered minion fall;
And when our cash her empty bags supply'd
Didst meanly strive the foul disgrace to hide;
Go, wretch, resign the presidential chair,
Disclose thy secret measures, foul or fair.
Go, search with curious eye for hornèd frogs,
'Mid the wild wastes of Louisianian bogs;
Or, where Ohio rolls his turbid stream,
Dig for huge bones, thy glory and thy theme.
Go, scan, Philosophist, thy Sally's charms,
And sink supinely in her sable arms;
But quit to abler hands the helm of state.'"

The poem, as this specimen shows, does not lack vigour. It is not far inferior to the political satire that was written in this country during the Revolution and

of which the work of Freneau is the typical illustration. Its invective is certainly forcible and it is easy to see how its allusions to Jefferson's "scientific" tastes, his unpopular Louisiana purchase, his French sympathies and his reputed immorality must have made its satire exceedingly effective at the time. Even for us at the present day it is interesting as the expression of a widespread contemporary view of the great Father of Democracy. The poem as a whole, then, is an amazingly clever production; but there is always something unpleasant in such a display of precocity. The boy satirist is on a par with the boy orator or preacher. At his age Bryant could have had no real opinions of his own, and what he wrote he must have repeated parrot-like with a preternatural facility for appropriating the words and phrases of others older than himself. To bring such a performance into public notice was a display of bad taste; but as we have said, the fault lies less with Bryant himself than with his father.

The satire sold well in Boston, and its success led Dr. Bryant the following year to bring out a new edition to which he added several other pieces that had appeared in the columns of the *Hampshire Gazette*. On the title-page, because of certain doubts that had been expressed of the work's being actually that of a boy of thirteen, the name of its young author was placed in full. Bryant also wrote a preface in which he alludes, in the satirical spirit of the poem itself, to the strictures of his critics. Of the additional poems, the longest was *The Spanish Revolution*, which celebrated in the same heroic measure the uprising of the Spanish patriots against Napoleon.

Neither it nor *The Embargo* nor any of the others was ever included by Bryant in any collection of his poems; and it is related by Mr. Godwin that when many years after he asked the poet if he had a copy of the pamphlet, he answered testily, "No, why should I keep such stuff as that?" And when told somewhat later by his son-in-law that he had succeeded in borrowing a copy from a friend, his reply was, "Well, you have taken a great deal of trouble for a very foolish thing."

CHAPTER II

SCHOOL AND COLLEGE; *THANATOPSIS*, 1811

WHEN *The Embargo* appeared, Bryant was still living upon the farm at Cummington. If he showed undue elation over his sudden notoriety, it no doubt found a corrective in the lack of any special consideration on the part of his grandfather, who was a stern disciplinarian and not likely to let even a young genius off from the appointed duties on the farm. For Bryant, like all other boys in New England rural districts, was expected to perform his share of the work in the fields. "As soon as I was able," he writes, "to handle the lighter implements of agriculture, I was employed in the summer season in farm work, under the tuition of my grandfather Snell, who taught me to plant and hoe corn and potatoes, to rake hay, and reap wheat and oats with the sickle." And he gives the following illustration of the method pursued in this course of instruction: "In raking hay, my grandfather put me before him, and, if I did not make speed enough to keep out of his way, the teeth of the rake touched my heels." The work was too much for a lad of his weak body, and labouring under the sun often brought on severe headaches.

Perhaps it was of this phase of his experience, and of the unsympathetic exactions of his grandfather, that he was thinking when he wrote:—

"I cannot say, as some do, that I found my boyhood the happiest part of my life. I had more frequent ailments than afterward, my hopes were more feverish and impatient, and my disappointments were more acute. The restraints upon my liberty of action, although meant for my good, were irksome, and felt as fetters that galled my spirit and gave it pain. After years, if their pleasures had not the same zest, were passed in more contentment, and, the more freedom of choice I had, the better, on the whole, I enjoyed life."

But the time of his release was now at hand. The success of *The Embargo* having perhaps finally decided Dr. Bryant in favour of a college education for his son, he was sent to the home of his mother's brother, the Rev. Thomas Snell, of North Brookfield, to begin the study of Latin. He made rapid progress, and in eight months he mastered the Latin grammar, read the Colloquies of Corderius, the New Testament in Latin, all of Virgil, and the orations of Cicero. Of the last two it is no more than we should expect of the temper of the poet that he preferred the former to the latter, and he willingly applied himself, at the suggestion of his father, to a translation into English verse, of the description of the tempest in the first book of the *Æneid*.

Bryant's health improved during his stay at his uncle's. In July he returned to Cummington, where he again took his place with the haymakers in the fields, and the following autumn he went to another school, kept by the Rev. Moses Hallock in the neighbouring township of Plainfield, to begin the study of Greek, to which, as he says, he now gave himself up with his whole soul. "I was early at my task in the morning, and kept on until bed-time; at night I

dreamed of Greek, and my first thought in the morning was of my lesson for the day. At the end of two calendar months I knew the Greek New Testament from end to end almost as if it had been English." At the end of this time he again returned to Cummington, where he continued his preparation for college without any help from a tutor, except for two months in the spring, when he went back to Mr. Hallock for a course in mathematics. In the beginning of September, 1810, he was taken by his father to Williamstown, where he passed an easy examination for the sophomore class.

Williams College was at this time a very small and struggling institution, having but recently been established. The teaching staff consisted of one professor, besides the president, Dr. Fitch, and two tutors, and the curriculum was correspondingly slight. The students were, for the most part, like Bryant himself, youths from the neighbouring country districts whose fathers were too poor to send them to Yale or to Harvard. Their life was barren of diversion and presented few of those phases of student activity and interest that characterize the undergraduate life of to-day at even the smallest American colleges. One institution they had, however, that has come down to their descendants. This was the literary or debating society. There were two of these organizations at Williams, the Philotechnian and the Philologian, which between them divided the student body. Bryant was led to join the former through the influence of his room-mate, who was already a member, and took great interest in the exercises. No doubt he was regarded as a valuable acquisition to the society. He had come to college with the reputation of a poet upon

him, because of *The Embargo*, and this he sustained by several other productions, one of which, a translation of Anacreon's ode on Spring, had the distinction of being mistaken for Moore's version of the same ode by several of the older students, to whom both translations, copied in the same handwriting, were submitted as a practical joke, by one of Bryant's classmates, for judgment.

Another poem, probably the *Version of Simonides*, Bryant wrote as a college exercise and read before the class, receiving the commendation of the tutor. It was not always, however, his own productions that he thus delivered publicly. He once chose a passage from Irving's *Knickerbocker's History of New York*, then a recent publication, but as he stood up and attempted to recite it, he was so overcome with irresistible laughter that he was forced to return to his seat, amid the general merriment of the class, but to the annoyance of the tutor.

Mr. Charles F. Sedgwick, a classmate with whose family he later became acquainted, describes Bryant as being "tall and slender in his physical structure, and having a prolific growth of dark brown hair," and says of him that "during his stay in college he associated with the more orderly and studious scholars, and was very modest and unobtrusive, though pleasantly familiar with his friends. His scholarship was respectable and his lessons were well-mastered." He adds, however, that with the exception of the two poems we have mentioned, there was "nothing in his show of scholarship or in the incidents of his college life which foretold the brilliancy of his subsequent career." His room-mate, John Avery, was more forci-

bly impressed, and he hazarded the prediction that if he lived he would make his mark as a poet.

On the whole, Bryant tells us, he found his college life agreeable. It is true that he wrote a pretty strong satire upon the college and its authorities which he delivered before the Philotechnian and which runs in one place: —

> "Why should I sing those reverent domes,
> Where Science rests in grave repose?
> Ah me! their terrors and their glooms
> Only the wretched inmate knows,
> Where through the horror-breathing hall
> The pale-faced, moping students crawl
> Like spectral monuments of woe;
> Or, drooping, seek the unwholesome cell,
> Where shade and dust and cobwebs dwell,
> Dark, dirty, dank and low."

But this need not be taken too seriously as an expression of his real feelings. It is a typical outpouring of the undergraduate, who always discovers something to anathematize and who finds his chief pleasure in the assertion of the immemorial privilege of free speech. It must be remembered, on the other hand, that at Williams Bryant first enjoyed anything like literary society, and found those outside his own family to whom he could show his verse, and with whom he could compare the results of his study and reading. His work in the regular course was easy and left him plenty of time to read miscellaneously. As much by himself, apparently, as under the guidance of his instructor, he came to a wide acquaintance with the Greek poets, who threw a special charm over his spirit and exerted no inconsiderable influence upon his poetry, in the love for finish and perfection of form, for sweet

and subdued sentiment, and for simplicity and naturalness of expression, which they inspired.

But agreeable or disagreeable, Bryant's college life was destined to be brief. At the end of seven months he became dissatisfied with the opportunities for scholarship offered by the little New England college, and when his room-mate left Williams to enter Yale, Bryant wished to do likewise and asked permission of his father, who consented to the step. Accordingly, having obtained an honourable dismission, he returned to Cummington to prepare himself for the junior class at New Haven. He worked hard all summer, only to be told by Dr. Bryant, as the time drew near to apply for admission, that his means were insufficient to provide for his further maintenance at college. The disappointment was keen, and remained with him more or less throughout life. In the Autobiography he writes: "I have always thought this unfortunate for me, since it left me but superficially acquainted with several branches of education which a college course would have enabled me to master, and would have given me greater readiness in their application."

And yet so far as his poetry is concerned, there is probably little reason to regret this curtailment of his academic career, or to feel that had he remained longer at college, what he wrote would have been very materially different. He had what we may call a natural inspiration. His poetry arose not from his mind but from his heart, and, intellectually alert as he always remained, taking the keenest interest in all matters that occupied the attention of his age, he continued to write almost exclusively of those simple ideas of life and death that arise spontaneously in the most untutored mind without conscious effort.

Bryant continued to live at home during the remainder of the autumn, and to study, read, and ramble about the country. He dipped desultorily into his father's medical library, became acquainted with chemistry through Lavoisier, and with botany in the system of Linnæus. More than these, however, poetry occupied his attention.

"About this time," he writes, "my father brought home, I think from one of his visits to Boston, the *Remains of Henry Kirke White*, which had been republished in this country. I read the poems with great eagerness, and so often that I committed several of them to memory, particularly the ode to the *Rosemary*. The melancholy tone which prevails in them deepened the interest with which I read them, for about that time I had, as young poets are apt to have, a liking for poetry of a querulous cast. I remember reading, at the time, that remarkable poem, Blair's *Grave*, and dwelling with pleasure upon its finer passages. I had the opportunity of comparing it with a poem on a kindred subject, also in blank verse, that of Bishop Porteus on *Death*, and of observing how much the verse of the obscure Scottish minister excelled in originality of thought and vigour of expression that of the English prelate. In my father's library I found a small thin volume of the miscellaneous poems of Southey, to which he had not called my attention, containing some of the finest of Southey's shorter poems. I read it greedily. Cowper's poems had been in my hands from an early age and I now passed from his shorter poems, which are generally mere rhymed prose, to his *Task*, the finer passages of which supplied a form of blank verse that captivated my admiration."

Here, unfortunately, ends the autobiographic fragment from which we have quoted so freely in the preceding pages. It leaves us at the very moment at which it might have proved of the greatest interest and value by throwing some light upon the circum-

stances of the composition of *Thanatopsis*. For it was undoubtedly to that poem that he had been leading up in his account of the literary influences to which he was subjected at this period. Probably he was deterred from proceeding with his narrative by reason of a certain haziness that obscured his recollection of these circumstances in later life, and even of the precise date, although, with respect to the latter, he finally accepted it as his own belief that *Thanatopsis* was written at Cummington in the autumn of 1811. Certainly it is easy to imagine that as he read, studied and compared, something of the mortuary mood of Blair and White imparted itself to his spirit, finding reënforcement in the spectacle of autumnal decay then unfolding itself before him, and that he was tempted to try his own hand at producing a similar effect. Blair would afford him with a model for the imaginative expression of this mood, and Cowper, for a superior metrical form, and the result would inevitably be such a poem as *Thanatopsis*.

But although we may thus trace the genesis of the poem, we must admit that its peculiar qualities are not such as could have been the result of mere facile imitation. Foremost among these is a note of noble moral elevation which we seek in vain in the studied stirring of sombre romantic draperies in *The Grave*, or in the sickly sentimentalities of that unwholesome infant prodigy, Henry Kirke White. *Thanatopsis*, as its title implies, is a view of death. But, unlike Blair's poem, it is no mere glorification of the grave for the sake of literary effect. Blair's purpose was: —

> "To paint the gloomy horrors of the *tomb*."

For Bryant, the whole earth was "the great tomb of

man." But overwhelming as was this conception, he derived from it rather a profound and ennobling consolation than a mood of luxurious romantic despair: —

> "Yet not to thine eternal resting-place
> Shalt thou retire alone.
> . . . . . .
> All that breathe
> Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh
> When thou art gone, the solemn brood of care
> Plod on, and each one as before will chase
> His favourite phantom; yet all these shall leave
> Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
> And make their bed with Thee."

It is this moral quality, seeking to humanize death by insisting on the common lot of man, that raises *Thanatopsis* above the level of *The Grave* and gives it value as the expression, not of a mere passing phase of literary sentiment, but of an aspect of general human experience. And for this enlargement of the mood in which he wrote, and to which he gave a more profound and philosophical significance, he was indebted to himself alone, or perhaps to the presence within him of the spirit of some mute old Puritan poet among his ancestors, determining the seriousness of his mind in its apprehension of man's mortality.

But *Thanatopsis* is not merely a moral poem: it is also a magnificent poem of nature, and here too it shows evidence of its strong originality. Blair, it is true, derives from nature the sable plumes to deck his funeral hearse. But nature is the very life and soul of Bryant's poem. Mingled and contrasted with the thought of the brief span of human existence and the trivial and transitory significance of human affairs, is the idea of the hoar antiquity and tremendous, un-

changing duration of the earth itself, moving majestically through its eternal order and engulfing the untold generations of men that have moved a little while upon its surface. The poem is full of pictures that, through a certain imaginative quality, serve to bring this conception into high relief. All is vast, rugged and infinite in suggestion. The mountains, the ocean, the forest and the wilderness are included in this survey of the world from a peak, as it were, thrown up immeasurably above the plain of usual vision. It is an ideal landscape, a landscape that is conceived as a mere adjunct to the main purpose of the poem. Yet in spite of this, no small degree of its impressiveness arises from its accurate descriptive strokes and powerful faculty of observing and recording external impressions in such lines as: —

> "The hills
> Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun, — the vales
> Stretching in pensive quietness between;
> The venerable woods — rivers that move
> In majesty, and the complaining brooks
> That make the meadows green; and, proud round all,
> Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste — "

Without as yet any conscious intention of imitating nature, Bryant shows that his mind is already stored with images and that within it is partly formed that mental picture of the external world which every artist builds up from the material of his early environment as the basis of his imaginative expression.

But if Bryant owed little to Blair in respect to nature or to moral seriousness, he owed less in the matter of art. The superiority of *Thanatopsis* to *The Grave* lies partly in the simple fact of its comparative brevity. The latter poem is interminably pro-

tracted. Its monotonousness is increased, moreover, by the lack of order in its arrangement. It is merely a succession of descriptive passages whose relation to each other is loosely determined only by the order of their occurrence to the mind of the poet. *Thanatopsis*, on the contrary, proceeds with a steady cumulative effect both in thought and imagery, through the natural expansion and development of the initial lyrical impulse. The influence of Blair is perhaps most felt in the persistence of a feeling for rhetorical effect. But while there may still be a tendency to overmuch sounding declamation, there is a marked gain in naturalness and control, which may be set down to the wholesome influence of Cowper. It was that poet, also, who supplied Bryant with a model for his blank verse. Blair, it is true, employed the same form, but with a lack of art to be expected in an age trained to the almost exclusive use of the heroic couplet. This Bryant perceived and therefore made Cowper his master. In his hands, however, blank verse became a wholly new instrument, as individual in its strength and cadence as that of Shakespeare, Milton or Tennyson. It moves with its own stately tread, pausing often and in places where the cæsura emphasizes and accentuates the rhetorical climax. It is thus an instrument, eloquent, rather than musical; but whatever its effect, it is thoroughly peculiar to itself and perfectly realizes one phase of poetic expression.

That *Thanatopsis* was a remarkable production for a youth of seventeen is undeniable. The handling of the blank-verse form, in which only the greatest poets have excelled, so as not only to satisfy the requirements of regularity but even to draw from it a new

effect of majestic sonorousness; the power of expression felt in the gift of phrase and in the restrained and imaginative use of epithet; the freedom from inversion and other kindred vices of immature versifiers; the skilful ordering of the poem in its several parts, all these things would do credit to a far more experienced hand than that of Bryant, especially in view of the fact that in his earlier poems, aside from their youthful cleverness, there is nothing to give promise of a style at once so noble and so natural. But it may be questioned whether the poem itself is not such as could have been written with equal depth of feeling and sincerity only by a very young man. At no time is the sentiment of death felt so absolutely as in youth. Life tends to accustom man to the idea of death and to blend with it other conceptions, moral and religious. Theories are formed as to the meaning of death and as to that which lies beyond. To the boy, however, who has not felt the urgency of such speculations through his own experience, there comes only the tremendous sadness, or, as perhaps in Bryant's case, we should say, rather, the solemn impressiveness, of the fact itself. The idea of immortality is a consolation that comes with age, and of it youth normally knows nothing. It is only in the epilogue, added some time after, that Bryant even alludes to this idea: —

"So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the galley-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, *sustained and soothed*
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave."

These were obviously added as an afterthought, possibly to anticipate the objections that have actually been made to the *paganism* of the poem. Pagan it certainly is, just as all poetry of youthful emotion, whether inspired by death or by the joy of life, is pagan. And it is none the less pagan for being preeminently a Puritan poem. For the Puritan mood, which is the conviction of a ruining world and of mankind's inexorable doom, is pagan as well as Christian. Among the Pilgrim settlers in New England, in their hard lives, such conviction came almost to overshadow the mysterious promises of salvation, and to give to their religion a pagan hardness of stern despair.

"It was the first adequate poetic voice of the stern New England spirit," writes George William Curtis, "and in the grandeur of the hills, in the heroic Puritan tradition of sacrifice and endurance, in the daily life, saddened by imperious and awful theologic dogma, in the hard circumstance of the pioneer household, the contest with the wilderness, the grim legends of Indians and the war, have we not some outward clue to the strain of *Thanatopsis*?"

Later, as we shall find, a sweeter, more Christian note steals into Bryant's sombre voicing of this solemn New England spirit. But in *Thanatopsis* the impenetrable sadness of a whole race surges like a sea of recollection into the heart of the brooding boy and takes possession of it; and both in the gloom of the vision and in the grandeur of the style is there not awakened, as in Tennyson's *Tithonus*,

"Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,"

some echo of the majestic dirge of that earliest of Puritan poets, the pagan Lucrétius?

CHAPTER III

THE STUDY OF THE LAW

Now that his college career was at an end it was necessary for Bryant to think seriously of the future, and to choose a career. It had originally been the intention of Dr. Bryant to prepare his son for the family profession of medicine. But later, something, probably his own experience of the hardships of a country doctor's life, seems to have altered his determination, and to have made him consider some other calling for his son. The law was finally decided upon, and in December Bryant was sent to Worthington to begin his studies under a Mr. Howe, with whom he took up his residence.

A new life now opened for Bryant, a life of more varied interests and of greater social opportunities than he had ever before known. Of these last, however, he did not take full advantage. He is described by Mrs. Howe as "a quiet, reserved and diffident" youth who kept much to himself, preferring his books and his botanizing in the field to society, and particularly to feminine society, of which he stood in some awe. He was fairly diligent in his legal work, though he still felt the effects of his disappointment at not being able to resume his classical and scientific studies too keenly to be able to enter into it with much zest or enthusiasm. Yet he was glad to be away from

the farm, and it is evident from a little poem, *Ad Musam*, in which he writes:—

> "So long neglectful of thy dues,
> And absent from thy shrine so long,
> Say, wilt thou deign, Immortal Muse,
> Again to inspire thy votary's song?"

that he regarded his removal to Worthington as much in the light of an opportunity to indulge, undisturbed, his poetic inclination as to prepare himself for a profession.

It was at this time too that he made the acquaintance of Wordsworth in the *Lyrical Ballads*.

"I shall never forget," writes Bryant's oldest friend, Richard H. Dana, "with what feeling my friend Bryant, some years ago, described to me the effect produced upon him by his meeting for the first time with Wordsworth's ballads. He said that, upon opening the book, a thousand springs seemed to gush up at once in his heart, and the face of Nature, of a sudden, to change into a strange freshness and life. He had felt the sympathetic touch from an according mind, and you see how instantly his powers and affections shot over the earth and through his kind."

This meeting with Wordsworth was indeed a momentous occasion for Bryant himself, and for American literature. Now for the first time he must have felt the meaning of that vague supplication to become a poet which he had so often made as a mere child at the knee of his mother. Hitherto he had not known that in his own love of nature there lay the seed of something more essentially poetic than in his admiration for, and ambition to imitate, the poets in his father's library. Even in *Thanatopsis* his real interest had

been in that mood of romantic gloom through which the world revealed itself to the visionary boy poet, vividly, imaginatively, impressively, yet, as before a storm, in a strained, unnatural light. Now he learned what nature herself might mean to a genuinely poetic spirit, and a new world lay open before him.

The natural development of Bryant's genius at this point was, however, for the moment arrested by a love affair, more or less obscure in its circumstances, the exigencies of which, rather overtaxing his present powers of expression, threw him back upon the stereotyped imagery and diction of the older poetry that he had abandoned to write *Thanatopsis*. In these little poems, many of which have been preserved for their autobiographical interest in Mr. Godwin's biography, he runs the gamut of happy and unhappy love — for the affair came to an unhappy termination. A feeling for nature enters into them, but it is for the most part artificial and conventional in its phrasing. Many of the references, as, for example, to the sea, and to foreign countries, are not described from his own observation and reflect on this side a bookish inspiration. Indeed, the series is filled out with versions of the Greek and Latin poets, who are made to serve as vehicles for his own sentiments.

This series is followed by another, giving voice to the mood of depression induced by his love disappointment. In it the mortuary mood of *Thanatopsis* is made personal, and death and the grave and dreamless annihilation are welcomed as a release from the sadness and bitterness of life. In the first poem a chorus of ghosts call to him to share their silent bed, and praise the delights of their dwelling place. He

invokes Death to learn if among them is a dear one who has gone to them. He is answered by her apparition, who motions him to follow her: —

"But oh, that eye is ghastly bright,
It glares with death, as mine will soon;
And that blanched brow is cold and white
As the pale mist beneath the moon.

"Oh, wave not that dim hand again,
Oh, point not to thy lowly cell;
For visions flash across my brain,
And thoughts too horrible to tell.

"I may not follow thee, my love,
Nor now thy dreams in slumber share;
The cold clods press thy limbs above,
And darkness and the worm are there.

"Yet a few hours, and Nature's hand,
Itself shall sorrow's balm apply;
And I shall bless the kind command
That cools this brow and seals this eye."

It is not made clear what is the connection between his dead love in this series and the girl with whom the preceding poems were occupied. She assuredly did not die; their rupture was of a different sort, judging by the words with which he left her: —

"I knew thee fair — I deemed thee free
From fraud and guile and faithless art,
Yet had I seen as now I see,
Thine image ne'er had stained my heart."

Evidently the person referred to in the later series is a purely fanciful figure, and the poems themselves were written to afford his mind the relief that is often found in the framing of images as dark and as dismal as

the mood by which the poet is possessed. There is a certain callow quality in their morbidity that places them at once in a very definite relation to the poet's youth and inexperience. Artistically, they are of little importance, but the poems comprised in the two series were preserved in the poet's papers and *The Chorus of Ghosts* was afterwards printed over the signature of X, in *The New York Review.*

One other poetic effort of this time was a Fourth of July ode written at the request of the Washington Benevolent Society. In this poem reference is made to the war excitement of the time. Like all Federalists, Bryant and his father were opposed to the war with Great Britain, in which they saw a truckling to the power of Napoleon. Bryant promises that, in a just cause,

> "A million swords would leave their sheaths
> A million bayonets blaze."

But for patriots, a war of shame is impossible, and if Napoleon commands them to draw the sword, and tries to enforce his mandate by debarking his veteran host upon their shores, he will find that—

> "A living wall of patriot hearts
> Shall fence the frowning coast—
> A bolder race than generous Spain,
> A better cause we boast."

It is difficult to conceive, at this distance, how the fear of Napoleon could have been aroused to such a pitch by his career in Europe, that an invasion of America, to make it, like Poland, a more or less unwilling ally of France, should have seemed anything more than the most impossible political chimera.

But that many did actually harbour a presentiment of such a turn of events, this poem is proof. Jefferson and Madison were regarded as dangerous Republicans who might go to any length to overwhelm the British monarchy and to establish the extreme type of French republicanism in America. Thus the Federalists came almost to look upon Great Britain as a friend, and in Massachusetts, their stronghold, to stand ready to make common cause with her against the enemy.

Still more of this interest in public affairs enters into the next phase of Bryant's life, which was passed in Bridgewater, the home of his ancestors, whither he removed from Worthington in June, 1814, to continue his legal studies in the law office of Mr. William Baylies, while living at the house of his grandfather, Dr. Philip Bryant. In another Fourth of July ode he praises England, with whom the country was still at war, for the part she had taken in the overthrow of Napoleon, and as the source of all our liberties; and condemns his own countrymen for the injustice of the war they had been carrying on against her: —

> "In sadness let the anthem flow,
> But tell the men of strife,
> On their own heads shall rest the guilt
> Of all this waste of life."

Bryant's audience was wholly in sympathy with these sentiments. It was not, however, in principle only that the people of Massachusetts were opposed to the War of 1812. They objected to it as strongly on grounds of self-interest. In the autumn of 1814, the British having threatened to destroy all the towns

along the sea-coast, the Massachusetts militia was mobilized at Plymouth and New Bedford and other places in anticipation of an attack. This left the farmers without hands to help them in the harvesting, and they grumbled and criticised the administration for prolonging the war and the peace negotiations at Ghent. Still more unpopular were the proposals for conscription and for an increased taxation. Rather than submit to such measures, Massachusetts threatened to make peace with Great Britain on her own account and even to sever her connection with the Union and set up an independent empire.

All these matters are discussed by Bryant, with much warmth of partisanship, in his letters of this period. The greater number of these were addressed to his instructor, Mr. Baylies, who was absent for the greater part of the time in Washington, representing the Bridgewater Federals in Congress, and whom he kept informed as to the temper of his constituency. In one of these letters he writes: —

"You inquire what our people think of the new system of taxation. I believe that I mentioned something upon the subject in my last, and I can now still more confidently say that, if the taxes proposed are made, they will be, in my opinion, the cause of violent and unstifled discontent. Perhaps we *shall not* agree to pay them. This will, however, depend upon the determination of our State Legislature, of which you have all the means of forming an opinion that we have here. I regret that I cannot give you a most particular account of the state of public feeling in these parts, but, as far as I am acquainted with it, there seems to be a deep presentiment of an approaching dissolution of the Union."

One of the measures considered by the Massachusetts Legislature was the raising of an army by volun-

tary enlistment for the defence of the state. Bryant, who foresaw an impending struggle, was anxious to enlist and wrote to his father, setting forth his arguments for desiring to take such a step and bespeaking his approval and support: —

"Attached as you are to your native soil, to its rights and safety, you could not, surely, be unwilling that your son should proffer his best exertions, and even his life, to preserve them from violation. The force now to be organized may not be altogether employed against a foreign enemy; it may become necessary to wield it against an intestine foe in the defence of dearer rights than those which are endangered in a contest with Great Britain."

In November, however, Bryant fell ill and was forced to return to Cummington. When he came back to Bridgewater in December, he seems to have lost something of his fire-eating enthusiasm. His application for a commission had failed, besides which, he now looked to the convention of the Federalists at Hartford for some plan by which could be amicably adjusted the differences between the eastern states and the Union. He censures his elder brother, Austin, in a letter that contrasts sharply with his previous utterances, for the too great impatience and aggressiveness of the people of Hampshire County, who "thought that the Eastern States were in a moment, and by a single effort, to be restored to peace, liberty and independence." He does not altogether abandon the idea that it may yet be necessary to dissolve the Union, but he prefers to wait and see what effect the deliberation and attitude of the Convention may have upon the government, which he thinks may be "alarmed into compliance" by the "dignified and

temperate firmness which steadily advances to its object."

While the convention was still in session, peace was declared (February 17, 1815); and when, in July, Bryant received his commission as adjutant in the Massachusetts militia, he scarcely knew what to do with it and returned it to the Commonwealth early in the following year.

So ended the first period of Bryant's active participation in national politics. It is a matter of curious interest to find at this time in one who in later years as journalist and statesman worked so hard to preserve the Union, an ardent advocate of the principle of secession. But the apparent inconsistency is of no significance. Bryant had scarcely reached his majority at the period of which we have been writing and could not be regarded as having formulated any real opinions of his own. As in his poetry, so in his politics, his first expression took colour from surrounding circumstances. He had grown up in an atmosphere charged with loyalty to the state in which he was born, and naturally, having had little occasion to reflect for himself, his attitude was merely the reflex of education and inherited prejudices. His development is analogous to that of Gladstone, who, bred amid the most conservative influences, at the opening of his parliamentary career found himself on the side opposed to reform, but who gradually, as his judgment matured, and his moral character asserted itself in ways of personal conviction and feeling, became the champion of the cause he had begun by resisting. In the same way, when, in Nullification days, South Carolina sought to defy the Federal

authorities, and later when the same state led the movement of secession, Bryant gave his whole soul to the support of the Union.

During this whole period of political excitement Bryant had been working hard at the law, his complete and by this time not unpleasant abandonment to which is expressed in the poem written *To a Friend on His Marriage* : —

> "O'er Coke's black-letter page,
> Trimming the lamp at eve, 'tis mine to pore,
> Well pleased to see the venerable sage
> Unlock his treasured wealth of legal lore;
> And I that loved to trace the woods before,
> And climb the hills a playmate of the breeze,
> Have vowed to tune the rural lay no more,
> Have bid my useless classics sleep at ease,
> And left the race of bards to scribble, starve and freeze."

On August 9, 1814, he had passed his preliminary examinations for admission to the bar and received his certificate, "sprinkled with snuff instead of with sand," as he wrote to his father. A year later he was received into full membership as an attorney of the Common Pleas.

CHAPTER IV

THE *NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*

WHILE at Bridgewater Bryant had written nothing but the verses to a friend on his marriage from which we have quoted, and a rather weak *Ode to Death* composed after his recovery from the illness which had necessitated his return to Cummington. He had been too deeply interested in politics and engrossed in his legal studies to follow his inclinations in their favourite direction, while town society, the first in which he had mingled, made large claims on his time and attention. Probably, too, he missed his old surroundings in Cummington, and found nothing in the rather flat and tame landscape of Suffolk County to stir his sensibilities. That these had been wonderfully quickened by that meeting with Wordsworth at Worthington is shown by the quality and character of his verse when he again returned to Cummington and began to write. For his themes he now went directly to nature. In so doing he became conscious of a certain change in himself with respect to the external world such as is often observed by subjective poets in their spiritual experience as they pass from boyhood to manhood. There was a feeling of having grown away from something intimate and precious in his old joyless, heedless association with nature. The scenes were the same, but he had not the same power to

identify himself with them as of old. Between him and them was interposed a barrier of soilure and sophistication taken on through the worldly experience of life. Thought did not follow feeling with the same exultant sense of inspiration as of old, and the mood with which he viewed the objects familiar to him since youth, was one of depression and regretfulness. To these feelings, which have received classical expression at the hands of Coleridge in the *Lime-Tree Bower*, Bryant gives utterance a little rhetorically and awkwardly, but not without a certain passionate sincerity, in the poem entitled "*I cannot forget with what Fervid Devotion*," which, although not printed till many years later, belongs to this period.

Yet this new sensation only served to heighten and intensify the attraction that Bryant found in nature, and he began to study it with the eye of the artist, intent on detail, that is, and on the problem of presenting a picture with delicate descriptive strokes, as few, yet as effective, as possible. Here Bryant's botanical studies had stood him in good stead by training his eye for minute and accurate observation. The same interest led him naturally to choose flowers for his first attempts at description, and the earliest of these poems of nature is that *Yellow Violet*, which he had written on a visit to Cummington while still studying at Bridgewater. This is the first of a series of flower poems, in all of which there is distinguishable a trace of the botanist in the remarkable fulness of information afforded not only as to the appearance of the flowers they describe but as to the localities in which they are found and the conditions under which they grow, as well. No other poet, not even Words-

worth excepted, equals Bryant in this particular quality, which, though it may not be the highest consideration in poetry, is nevertheless a certain mark of genuineness and has given poems like *The Yellow Violet* and *The Fringed Gentian* a special value to nature lovers and to children and has caused them to be preserved as classics in all school readers and collections of nature poetry.

Most of Bryant's work at this time was tentative and fragmentary. It consisted of detached stanzas, little preliminary sketches, through which he habituated his hand to the catching and rendering of fugitive aspects of the infinite variety of nature in light and shade, form and colour, motion and quietude. Little by little, as his mastery grew, he began to string these sketches together and to attempt broader and more sustained effects, with the result, finally, of that charming poem, *Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood*, or, as it was first entitled, simply, *A Fragment*. In this poem he shows not only how closely he had observed every manifestation of life in the old Pontusac forest that fronted his father's home, but with what imaginative power he could already compose a picture on a large scale and even evoke the special feeling of tranquillity and contentment and religious awe peculiar to the place: —

> "The thick roof
> Of green and stirring branches is alive
> And musical with birds, that sing and sport
> In wantonness of spirit; while below
> The squirrel with raised paws and form erect
> Chirps merrily. Throngs of insects in the shade
> Try their thin wings and dance in the warm beam

> That waked them into life. Even the green trees
> Partake the deep contentment; as they bend
> To the soft winds, the sun from the blue sky
> Looks in and sheds a blessing on the scene."

This passage serves to show what an advance Bryant had made in his art, even over *Thanatopsis*, by freeing himself from the morbid meditations inspired by Blair and White and turning to nature in a mood of more wholesome enjoyment. *Thanatopsis* has always enjoyed a greater degree of popularity than any other poem, but it is inferior to *Inscription*, and many other later pieces, in simple naturalness of expression. If in *Thanatopsis* there are still traces of the rhetoric and false taste of the eighteenth century which seem inseparable from the theme itself of death, as Bryant had approached it, these disappear in the attempt to express a more universal delight in the seclusion of deep forest solitude, and we feel, with greater certainty than before, that it is the real voice of the poet to which we are listening.

But Bryant was still in the experimental stage when he wrote the *Inscription* which was only a fragment, as he had called it, and it was not until the end of the year that he produced a poem in which were felt to the full all the effects of his recent study and practice. As the year 1815 drew toward a close, it became necessary for him to fix upon a place for the practice of his profession. He himself preferred Boston, but such a location, in view of the cost of his maintenance in a large city, while waiting for his first clients, was out of the question. Thus it was finally decided that for the time, at least, he should take up his residence at the neighbouring village of Plainfield, where he had

attended the school of the Rev. Thomas Hallock. On the 15th of December Bryant walked the seven miles separating the two villages, to make certain preliminary inquiries. This walk proved a very memorable occasion, not so much because it settled the prospect of his immediate future, as because in the course of it he composed the poem, *To a Waterfowl*, which of all that he wrote is generally conceded to be the highest expression of his genius. His mood as he tramped along was not of the brightest. Thwarted in his ambition to seek fame and fortune in a great city, and doomed to an existence the limitations of which he could easily prognosticate, he felt a forlornness and desolation of spirit and a doubt as to what would become of him, to which the waning of the winter day and the dreariness of the winter landscape gave an added emphasis.

"The sun had already set," writes Mr. Godwin, "leaving behind it one of those brilliant seas of chrysolite and opal which often flood the New England skies; and, while he was looking upon the rosy splendour with rapt admiration, a solitary bird made wing along the illuminated horizon. He watched the lone wanderer until it was lost in the distance, asking himself whither it had come and to what far home it was flying. When he went to the house where he was to stop for the night, his mind was still full of what he had seen and felt, and he wrote those lines, as imperishable as our language, *The Waterfowl*."

Such praise may seem superlative, but it is in a measure justified by the opinion of no less a critic than Matthew Arnold, who once agreed with Hartley Coleridge in pronouncing *The Waterfowl* to be the best short poem in the English language. However this may be, *The Waterfowl* is a great poem, the finest

expression, as we have said, of Bryant's genius. It combines that power of imaginative description which Bryant had been cultivating during the preceding months, with an intensity of emotional feeling that is very rarely felt in his poetry and is never again fused so completely with the objects that inspired it. The main criticism that has been passed upon the poem is that it is marred by didacticism. It is asserted that the final stanza injures the unity of the poem as a whole through the introduction of a gratuitous moral note. This might be just if *The Waterfowl* were merely a descriptive poem, an attempt to render the special life of the bird as a natural object. Such a criticism may hold with respect to a piece like *The Yellow Violet*, where the last two stanzas do indeed constitute a formal blemish, since the moral that they set forth is obviously an afterthought. But in *The Waterfowl* the moral idea is the central inspiration. The bird presented itself at first sight to Bryant as a symbol of his own destiny, and this thought underlies the piece through the entire course of its development. Not unless we deny the existence of moral emotions and of their right to expression in poetry, can any fault be found with *The Waterfowl*, which is an elevated and passionate utterance of man's most profound religious faith and hope in divine guidance.

Bryant had passed but three months in Plainfield when he took advantage of a better opening in the large and thriving town of Great Barrington in Berkshire County, where he formed a partnership with a young resident lawyer. He was again at this time attacked by his old pulmonary complaint, which, he says, wasted him to a shadow, but from which he

recovered and set himself hard to work. He soon bought out his partner and continued the practice by himself, doing not only the office work, but speaking in court as well, a part of his profession for which he was not particularly fitted and which he thoroughly disliked. His prospects in Great Barrington were very good, and save for the old conflict with his literary ambition, to which his present mode of life was strictly opposed, he seems to have been very well satisfied with his position. "You ask whether I am pleased with my profession," he writes to his old master, Mr. Baylies; "alas! sir, the Muse was my first love, and the remains of that passion, which is not *rooted out*, nor clubbed into extinction, will always, I fear, cause me to look coldly on the severe beauties of Themis."

It is probable that at this moment he saw all hope of ever becoming a poet receding irrevocably into the past. So far, what he had written had been largely by way of experiment and the product of his brief periods of leisure. He regarded himself, no doubt, as in the student stage, and felt that real accomplishment could only come from a long extension of this term of apprenticeship. Such an extension was, however, impracticable under the circumstances; so that if Bryant ever thought of the fragments he had left among his papers at Cummington, it must have been with keen dissatisfaction and regret. He himself would hardly have had the temerity to take them from their hiding-place and proffer them for publication. Indeed, when a request for contributions came, through his father, from the editors of the new *North American Review*, Bryant was silent. It was Dr.

Bryant who, when his son did not respond, rummaged through his desk and unearthed the poems of the last two years, among which were *Thanatopsis*, the *Inscription* and *The Waterfowl*. That he was deeply affected by the discovery of a series of poems so far beyond anything of which he had believed his son capable, is attested by the tradition that, running with them at once to a neighbour, he burst into tears and exclaimed, "Oh, read that; it is Cullen's!"

Immediately, without waiting to obtain his son's permission, and making a fair copy of *Thanatopsis* in his own hand, since the original was full of interlineations and erasures, he carried the poems to Boston to show them to his friend, Mr. Willard Phillips, one of the editors of the new review, from whom the request for contributions had come.

"Mr. Phillips was not at home," writes Mr. Godwin, who tells the story, "and so he left his package with his name. When it was put into the editor's hands, he read the poems with absorbed interest, saw at once their superiority to what he had been in the habit of receiving, and he hastened with them to his fellows in Cambridge, to take their opinion. They listened attentively to his reading of them, when Dana [Richard H. Dana, henceforth to become Bryant's life-long friend and adviser] at the close remarked, with a quiet smile: 'Ah! Phillips, you have been imposed upon; no one on this side of the Atlantic is capable of writing such verses.' . . . But Phillips rejoined, with some spirit, that he had not been imposed upon. 'I know,' he said, 'the gentleman who wrote the best of them, at least, very well; an old acquaintance of mine, Dr. Bryant, at this moment sitting in the State House in Boston as Senator from Hampshire County.' 'Then,' responded Dana, 'I must have a look at him,' and putting on his clogs and his cloak, he trudged over to Boston. 'Arrived at the Senate,' said Mr. Dana, in a

conversation afterward with the Rev. Robert C. Waterston, 'I caused the doctor to be pointed out to me. I looked at him with profound attention and interest; and, while I saw a man of striking presence, the stamp of genius seemed to me to be wanting. It is a good head, I said to myself, but I do not see *Thanatopsis* in it,' and he went back a little disappointed."

The editors seem in the end to have been convinced of the good faith of Dr. Bryant, for two of the poems, *Thanatopsis* and *Fragment*, were printed in the September number of the *North American Review*. To the former, unfortunately, were prefixed four inferior stanzas, on the subject of Death, which had no connection with the poem proper, but which were evidently thought to form an introduction to it. To this fact Mr. Godwin attributes the lack of attention which the poem attracted on its publication. But a sufficient explanation of the silence with which it was passed over may be found in the standards of poetic taste and judgment prevailing in the country at the time of its appearance. These, just as before the Revolution, continued to be provincial in the extreme and to reflect in grotesque distortion the current phases of contemporary English literature. The age of Pope and the classical school of the eighteenth century was passing, and in its place the influence of the new romantic movement was generally beginning to be felt throughout the country. But it was only the most superficial and specious traits of the most fashionable and falsest phases of romanticism that were caught and copied. Montgomery, Campbell, Moore and White bulked at least as large as Scott and Byron, while Wordsworth and Coleridge were almost unknown. A few, like

Washington Allston and his younger kinsmen, Dana and Channing, had already made the acquaintance of the last two poets. But such men were rare, and American taste was content, for the most part, to follow the lower levels of current romanticism, and not only to accept, but to demand, feeble imitations of second-rate popular poets. Bryant's very originality was therefore a distinct disadvantage to him, while his highly imaginative and ideal quality would necessarily pass unnoticed in a country where poetry was regarded as a polite metrical exercise rather than as the highest human function. Within the coterie, however, there was no uncertainty as to the quality of the two poems and their epoch-making meaning for American literature.

Mr. Phillips wrote to Bryant from Cambridge in December, recalling the fact that he had known him in childhood, and saying: "Your *Fragment* was exceedingly liked here. Among others, Mr. Channing, the clergyman [William Ellery Channing, whose brother Edward was one of the editors of the *Review*], spoke highly of it, and all the best judges say that it and your father's *Thanatopsis* are the very best poetry that has been published in this country."

The error of attributing the more famous poem to the father arose, as we have seen, from the fact of the manuscripts having been recognized as his. Dr. Bryant took pains to inform Phillips of the mistake, but the latter must have neglected to share his information with his fellow-editors, for so late as 1821, when the real poet visited Boston, he found that Dana was still under the impression that *Thanatopsis* was the work of the elder Bryant.

Renewed invitations now came from the editors for contributions in prose and verse, and Bryant wrote to his father, enclosing the *Version of Simonides*, written at college, and the lines *To a Friend on His Marriage*, written at Bridgewater, and indicating his willingness to contribute something in prose if he but knew on what to write. Mr. Phillips was not slow in supplying a subject, and soon wrote to Bryant suggesting a review of a work on American poetry that had recently appeared.

The poet at once complied and the result was an essay on American poetry in which he traced the tradition of verse in this country from its beginnings and passed in critical review the work of the most important of his predecessors. For one who had felt appreciatively the spell of the greatest modern poetry and who, however modest, must have recognized the superiority of his own work to anything that had previously been produced, the task could not have been an inspiring one. In fact, throughout his essay, though reserved in his judgments for the most part and disposed to praise where he can, Bryant scarcely conceals his sense of the slight importance of what had been accomplished by the early American poets. Of their work as a whole he can conscientiously say only that "though it has not reached any high degree of perfection, it is yet, perhaps, better than it could have been expected to be, considering that our nation has scarcely seen two centuries since its founders erected their cabins on its soil, and that our citizens are just beginning to find leisure to attend to intellectual refinements, to indulge in intellectual luxury, and to afford the means of rewarding intellectual excellence."

Perhaps it was not so much the lack of leisure to attend to intellectual refinements, especially during the eighteenth century, as the blight of provincialism, that had retarded the development of a native literature. At all events it must be admitted that poetry did not flourish greatly in America during the colonial and early national periods, and that even after political independence had been triumphantly asserted, it was some time before the newly acquired consciousness of nationality made itself felt in the conservative field of letters. Yet poetry of a sort there had always been in America from the earliest days. Even the Puritans, though the demands made upon the practical genius of the race had in great measure exhausted its creative energies, had had a tradition of poetry, such as it was. They had prepared a version of the Psalms for use in their meeting-houses, and had indulged in scriptural paraphrases, rhymed arguments in favour of this or that doctrinal point of Calvinistic theology and pious elegies and epitaphs in which the virtues of departed elders and divines were solemnly celebrated. A little later, as New England society became secularized, the influence of Pope was introduced into the colonies through such verses as those of Mrs. Anne Bradstreet, and there grew up a tradition of polite poetry that was feebly but elegantly imitative of the fashionable English verse of the period. In the days before the Revolution verse became a favourite vehicle for polemic and satire, and the work of men like Francis Hopkinson, author of *The Battle of the Kegs*, of Philip Freneau, "The Poet of the Revolution," and of Jonathan Trumbull, who wrote the Hudibrastic poem, *McFingal*, is not without a certain merit. After the Revolution came

the so-called Hartford Wits, who made the first sustained effort to establish a national American literature and who produced, in Dwight's *Conquest of Canaan* and in Barlow's *Columbiad*, two colossal epics which, whatever their want of merit, at least bear witness to a vaunting ambition.

Even at the time at which Bryant was writing, therefore, American poetry was not without possibilities as a theme for the literary historian. The appeal of his criticism is limited, however, by the fact that all of those on whom he touched, with the possible exception of Freneau,[1] have long since passed into oblivion. Yet Bryant's essay possesses personal interest as the expression of his feeling for that past from which he himself was emerging. For Bryant stands halfway between the old and the new in American literature. He had received his training in the traditions of colonial culture. His first poetic attempts had, as we have seen, been cast in the mould of that characteristic Puritan type, the scriptural paraphrase; his father's influence had kept him in touch with the classical conventions of the eighteenth century; and in *The Embargo* he had but followed the current declining fashion of rhymed political invective and satire. The past of which he wrote had thus

[1] Bryant scarcely does justice to Freneau in this essay. He refers to him only as the rather gross satirist. Perhaps he had never come across those delicate and highly imaginative little poems, the product of a purer inspiration, which contained lines good enough for Scott and Campbell to appropriate. If so, it was not remarkable, for they might easily have escaped detection, buried as they were in the vast bulk of Freneau's political writings. Later students, however, have not failed to unearth them, and occasionally even to base upon them a plea for Freneau, in place of Bryant, as the first real poet produced in America.

been essentially his own past and his view was that of the traveller who looks down from some new eminence back over the road by which he himself has come.

Bryant's appraisal of this past, considering his closeness to it, is singularly just and free from that false patriotic bias which has ever been the bane of native literature in America. He perceived that the poetry of Puritan times had only its quaintness and curiosity to recommend it; that the political satire of the revolution was coarse and crude, though occasionally characterized by vigour and originality; and that the work of the Hartford Wits was vitiated by an attempt to copy "certain of the poets of England who flourished near the period in which they began to write."

This imitative tendency which marks the provincialism of American letters, even during the first national period, continued in Bryant's own day to be the besetting sin of native poets, and he scores it in the following characteristic passage: —

"With respect to the style of poetry prevailing at the present day in our country, we apprehend that it will be found, in too many instances, tinged with a sickly and affected imitation of the peculiar manner of some of the late popular poets of England. We speak not of a disposition to emulate whatever is beautiful and excellent in their writings, still less would we be understood as intending to censure that sort of imitation which, exploring all the treasures of English poetry, culls from all a diction that shall form natural and becoming dress for the conception of the writer — this is a course of preparation which every one ought to go through before he appears before the public — but we desire to set a mark on that servile habit of copying which adopts the vocabulary of some favourite author, and apes the fashion of his sentences, and cramps and forces the ideas into a shape which they would not naturally have taken,

and of which the only recommendation is, not that it is most elegant or most striking, but that it bears some resemblance to the manner of him who is proposed as a model. This way of writing has an air of poverty and meanness: it seems to indicate a paucity of reading as well as a perversion of taste; it might almost lead us to suspect that the writer had but one or two examples of poetical composition in his hands, and was afraid of expressing himself, except according to some formula which they might contain; and it has ever been, and ever will be, the resort of those who are sensible that their works need some factitious recommendation to give them even a temporary popularity."

This was a new note in American criticism, if, indeed, American criticism may not actually be said to have started with this modest little essay. Emerson's *Address on the American Scholar*, delivered some eighteen years afterwards, has been called the intellectual Declaration of Independence of the United States; but so far as poetry, at least, is concerned, it is antedated by Bryant's dictum that henceforth American poets should seek to achieve original self-expression and no longer merely imitate the style of any given school or master, whether past or present. Bryant himself, it is true, had not wholly avoided the tendency of his age towards imitation. But even in *Thanatopsis*, in which the evidences of this tendency are most apparent, he had shown how imitation might be made, not an end in itself, but a means of acquiring individual mastery.

Bryant's essay, therefore, reënforced the truth of which *Thanatopsis*, *Inscription* and *The Waterfowl* had been concrete illustrations, that for a literature to be national it must, first of all, be natural, and that in order to become the expression of a race, it must originate as the genuine personal expression of individual

genius. Hence the national tradition in American literature begins with Bryant, both as critic and creator.

Bryant contributed two other essays to the *North American* at this time, one on *The Happy Temperament*, and another on *Trisyllabic Feet in Iambic Verse*. The latter, as its title indicates, is a plea for the free use of the characteristic metre of English prosody. It seems a small matter whether or not the poet shall be permitted to introduce an occasional extra syllable into the regular flow of his verse, but technically this was the ground of the romantic revolt in English poetry. Coleridge made much of the same matter and even tried to introduce a new system of scansion by which the number of accents alone should be determined as the measure of a line of poetry. Bryant did not go so far as this. An occasional anapest was the extent of his contention, and supplied him in his own practice with all the variety he needed in his simple form of verse. It was left to Poe to be the metrical theorist, on any large scale, of American literature. Bryant also sent another poem to the *North American*, *The Yellow Violet*. This, however, did not appear, because the editors had decided to give up the department of original poetry, for what reason we do not know, unless it was the dearth of material and the discouraged conviction borne in upon them that one bird like Bryant did not make a poetic summer. The literary prospects were at the moment bad, and apparently justified Bryant's remark that "on the whole, there seems to be more good taste among those who read than those who write poetry in our country." Yet a new age was dawning, and in a few years the whole country was to become vocal with the songs of a new generation of poets.

CHAPTER V

GREAT BARRINGTON

WHILE Bryant was thus achieving a reputation as a poet and essayist in Boston and Cambridge, he was pursuing the practice of his profession at Great Barrington and taking a part in the affairs of the community that brought him no small measure of success of another sort. He had already made a place for himself in the town both as a lawyer and as a citizen, and his residence there after two years began to assume somewhat the aspect of permanency. Recent events had indeed revived in him the desire to seek a wider field in Boston, where there now was the added attraction of a group of men whose welcome would be cordial and whose companionship in literary intercourse would afford an agreeable diversion from his professional labours. Obedient, however, to his father's judgment, he remained at Great Barrington, working hard and trying to keep his resolve not to let poetry interfere with his devotion to the law.

Already he had acquired a local reputation as a man of letters through an address on the Bible which he delivered before the Bible Society of Great Barrington. In 1819 he was elected a tithing-man, his duties being to preserve order in the churches and to enforce observance of the Sabbath. A little later he was made town clerk, in which capacity he served for six years, or

until he left the community. He was also appointed a Justice of the Peace by the Governor of the Commonwealth. Another local duty which he was called upon to perform was the delivery of a Fourth of July oration in the neighbouring town of Stockbridge, where he spoke from the pulpit of the Old Church.

"His delivery was modest and graceful," writes a witness of the proceedings. "I got a position in the gallery near the speaker, and have not forgotten how fine, large, and prominent his forehead appeared to run under the brown locks that curled around it. He was already looked upon as a person of unusual literary attainments — one of the best botanists of Berkshire, one of the best classical scholars in all Massachusetts, and a poet *facile princeps* on this side of the Atlantic."

Bryant's subject was the "Missouri Compromise," and his attitude of abhorrence towards this famous party measure of Clay's may be taken as the first indication of his gradual divorce from Federalism and of the position he was to take at a later period with reference to a leading question of national politics.

In 1820 occurred the death of his father at the age of fifty-three. This was the first great personal loss sustained by the poet, and the shock and sadness of it found expression in some lines then added to an old poem, *Hymn to Death*, which had been left lying unfinished among his papers. The poem had up to this point been a eulogy of death as the great justifier of good and evil: —

> "Thus, from the first of time, hast thou been found
> On virtue's side; the wicked, but for thee,
> Had been too strong for the good; the great of earth
> Had crushed the weak for ever,"

Now he changes his note, and continues in a vein of reproachfulness and regret: —

> "Alas! I little thought that the stern power
> Whose fearful praise I sang, would try me thus
> Before the strain was ended. It must cease —
> For he is in his grave who taught my youth
> The art of verse, and in the end of life
> Offered me to the Muses. Oh, cut off
> Untimely! When thy reason in its strength,
> Ripened by years of toil and studious search,
> And watch of Nature's silent lessons, taught
> Thy hand to practise best the lenient art
> To which thou gavest thy laborious days,
> And, last, thy life. And, therefore, when the earth
> Received thee, tears were in unyielding eyes
> And on hard cheeks, and they who deemed thy skill
> Delayed their death-hour, shuddered and turned pale
> When thou wert gone. This faltering verse, which thou
> Shalt not, as wont, o'erlook, is all I have
> To offer at thy grave — this — and the hope
> To copy thy example, and to leave
> A name of which the wretched shall not think
> As of an enemy's, whom they forgive
> As all forgive the dead."

As we quote, however, although there are tender touches and the feeling is sincere, we miss something in the expression of the verse. It is as if Bryant did not know quite what to say or how to express himself in the presence of a real grief. There is not the same imaginative flow in this expression of his personal bereavement as in *Thanatopsis* or indeed in the earlier portion of the *Hymn* itself, in which death is regarded in its universal aspect. And here we come face to face with Bryant's most conspicuous limitation as a poet. Always ready to let his feeling and his imagination

linger and play about death when it presented itself under aspects that appealed to his artistic nature, he seems to have lacked, or held in reserve, that force of personal emotion, the absence of which leaves both his personality and his poetry cold, though elevated.

Although it would, perhaps, be unjust to describe him as a sentimentalist, what Bryant loved best to contemplate, at this time, at least, was the image of himself overcast with a shadow of not unpleasant melancholy, such as we find reflected in *The Green River*, which was written in the year preceding the death of his father. The poem, which is one of the best of his nature pieces, after describing with a vivid and beautiful imaginative touch the delights of a quiet retreat he has found along the river margin, ends with the following lines: —

> "Though forced to drudge for the dregs of men
> And scrawl strange words with the barbarous pen,
> And mingle among the jostling crowd,
> Where the wars of strife are subtle and loud —
> I often come to this quiet place,
> To breathe the air that ruffles thy face,
> And gaze upon thee in silent dream,
> For in thy lonely and lovely stream
> An image of that calm life appears
> That won my heart in my greener years."

With the exception of the fragment entitled *The Burial-Place, Green River* was the only poem written by Bryant after settling in Great Barrington, up to the time of his father's death. This same year, however, his services were put in requisition by the Unitarians for some hymns to add to a collection they were then making. The request came through Miss

Catherine M. Sedgwick, later the author of *Redwood* and other novels of American life, who lived in Stockbridge and whose family were among the most prominent and influential people of the Berkshire region. Bryant had already met Charles, the youngest brother of Miss Sedgwick, who, like himself, was a member of the Berkshire bar, and who introduced him to the rest of the family. They "from the first," he says, "seemed to take pleasure in being kind to me." Miss Sedgwick herself was a charming young woman, not a great deal older than Bryant. But if she impressed him with a superiority above anything he had yet known in feminine talent, breeding and cultivation, she was, it appears, scarcely less taken with the young poet, to whom, long after, she confessed that he was one of the first objects of her hero-worship. Her brothers were scarcely behind her in their liking for Bryant, and, as they were all in a position to render him much assistance in the coming days when his career seemed most unsettled and insecure, they gladly exerted themselves in his behalf.

Another incentive to write came from Dana, who in 1820 formed a project for a new periodical, to be entitled *The Idle Man*, and who as a matter of course invited Bryant to contribute. Again *The Yellow Violet* was resurrected, and, accompanied by *Green River*, which Bryant pretended to have rescued from his scrap-basket, was sent to Dana with a hint that his legal work "was not so absorbing that he might not turn off some trifle occasionally." Time was found to write three pieces in the course of the next year, *The West Wind*, *A Winter Piece* and *A Walk at Sunset*, all in Bryant's best vein of imaginative description,

so that his contribution to *The Idle Man*, in its attempt, as Bryant puts, it "to bring us back to the purer and better feelings of our nature," was not inconsiderable. *The Burial Place* also first appeared in this medium.

One poem in his portfolio Bryant did not send Dana. This was the lyric entitled, *Oh, Fairest of the Rural Maids*, one of a series of poems that he had written in 1820 to Miss Fanny Fairchild, a girl of nineteen, the daughter of farming folk in the neighbourhood, who had died and left her to live with her married sisters. Bryant met her at a village "sociable" and fell in love with her at first sight, which is no wonder, if we accept her description as "a very pretty blonde, small in person, with light brown hair, gray eyes, a graceful stature, a dainty foot, transparent and delicate hands, and a wonderfully frank and sweet expression of face." Absence played its part in strengthening his attachment, and on her return from a long journey into western New York, during which Bryant consoled himself at home with lyrical expression of his grief, the couple became engaged, a step very seriously considered, as may be seen from the following prayer with which their betrothal was solemnized: —

"May Almighty God mercifully take care of our happiness here and hereafter. May we ever continue constant to each other, and mindful of our mutual promises of attachment and truth. In due time, if it be by the will of Providence, may we become more nearly connected with each other, and together may we lead a long, happy and innocent life, without any diminution of affection till we die. May there never be any jealousy, distrust, coldness or dissatisfaction between us — nor any occasion for any — nothing but kindness, forbearance, mutual confidence and attention to each other's

happiness. And that we may be less unworthy of so great a thing, may we be assisted to cultivate all the benign and charitable affections and offices not only toward each other, but toward our neighbours, the human race, and all the creatures of God. And in all things wherein we have done ill, may we properly repent our error, and may God forgive us and dispose us to do better. When at last we are called to render back the life we have received, may our deaths be peaceful and may God take us to his bosom. All which may he grant for the sake of the Messiah." — "Great Barrington, 1820."

The marriage took place on the 11th of June, 1821. Shortly after this great event occurred a second. Bryant received an invitation from the secretary of the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard College to read a poem at the Commencement. This was the first considerable public honour that he had had conferred upon him, and inasmuch as it carried with it distinguished recognition as a poet, it must have been the source of great satisfaction. But the painful anticipation of an ordeal for which he had had little or no experience to prepare him, offset much of the pleasure he felt at the invitation. Nevertheless he wrote, accepting, although he humbly begged for such information and guidance as would prevent him "from doing anything *outré* or getting foul of an interdicted subject."

The form which Bryant chose was the Spenserian stanza, a curious choice that added to the difficulty of the task, since he had never before attempted that style of composition. He worked away at his poem all summer and at the end of August he went to Boston. The trip in itself was a source of much enjoyment, for though he had made one brief visit to New York, Boston, the goal of his earliest ambition, he had

not as yet seen. It was not the city, however, but the people, in whom he was principally interested. Here, among the many distinguished men, lawyers, statesmen, professors, poets and artists who made their homes in Boston and Cambridge, he met for the first time the three editors of the *North American*, whom he had long since come to regard as his friends, Channing, Phillips and Dana. They welcomed him with a cordiality that was particularly marked on the part of Dana, whose interest had been most strong from the start in the young unknown poet. Evidently Bryant's personality did not disappoint the impression made by his poetry upon Dana, for from that moment mere interest deepened into affection, and an attachment grew up between the two men that lasted throughout the lives of both. Their names are linked indissolubly in the history of American literature. Yet a greater contrast can scarcely be conceived than that which they present in almost every circumstance of situation and character.

Dana was some years Bryant's senior, having been born at Cambridge in 1787. Unlike his friend, whose family, according to the professional and literary standards obtaining among the descendants of the Puritan settlers in New England, was without social standing, he belonged to what Dr. Holmes has called the Brahmin caste of Massachusetts society. He was a direct descendant of Governor Dudley, and of his daughter, Anne Bradstreet, the early American poetess, the "Tenth Muse" as she was flatteringly entitled in her own time. He was a graduate of Harvard, had practised law in Boston and had even served in the Massachusetts legislature. Contrast-

ing with Bryant's country-bred seclusion, were Dana's contact and intercourse with the best society of Boston and Cambridge. He knew intimately Washington Allston, the poet and painter, who was a kinsman by marriage. Allston had lived much abroad and had met Coleridge, whose poetry perhaps he was the first to appreciate in America. And it was to him, therefore, without doubt, that Dana owed that awakening of interest in the modern school of English poetry which was henceforth to be the principal bond of intellectual sympathy between himself and Bryant.

In all other respects they represented more and more, as time passed, the most opposite poles of thought and feeling. Both started as Federalists in politics; but from this common point of departure each underwent a separate development wholly antagonistic to that of the other. While Bryant tended gradually towards that ideal of democracy represented by his former bugbear, Jefferson, Dana, following the trend of the extreme Federalist theory, became almost a monarchist in his hatred and mistrust of republicanism. In the matter of religion it was the same. Born a Calvinist, Bryant became a convert to Unitarianism, and remained faithful to its doctrines throughout his life. Dana, on the other hand, reacted from the liberalizing tendency of his age and became a High Church Episcopalian. There could thus be little sympathy or helpful intercourse between Bryant and Dana in matters where religion and politics were involved, and it is therefore the more remarkable that the relations between the two men, neither of whom was indifferent, should have remained so close, so almost fraternal, for over half a century.

On the whole the affection seems to have been more active in Dana than in Bryant, unless, as it may be, the comparative coldness of the latter was merely the cover for a feeling that expressed itself less freely in his share of the long interchange of letters that makes a feature of both their lives. Dana's attitude towards Bryant was that of an older brother, making itself felt in praise, encouragement, kindly tactful criticism, gentle admonishment and a care for his reputation and success that came in large measure to replace interest in his own. For Dana himself had had literary ambitions, which he relinquished when he realized that he had not the personal force to make a success. As it was, at a later day he turned poet, principally for his own amusement, and produced, along with some shorter pieces, a long poem entitled *The Buccaneer*, in which is strongly if crudely felt the influence of the object of his early enthusiasm, Coleridge. Thus the two friends, Bryant and Dana, represented together the influence on American letters of the two greatest English poets of their time. Indeed, if Bryant is called the American Wordsworth, Dana may not unfairly be called the American Coleridge. At least he possessed a grasp upon the principles of ideal art not unworthy of the namesake we have given him. In this he was Bryant's superior. Dana's was the stronger intellect, the more accurate and unerring critical sense. Brought to bear at all points, with infinite pains and patience of detail, upon Bryant's work, this faculty played no small part in the perfecting of the expression of his art.

On the whole, therefore, the initiation of his friendship with Dana was the most important result of

Bryant's visit to Cambridge. It overshadows the immediate object of the trip — the reading of the poem, *The Ages*. This last, however, was performed successfully. The exercises were held in the Old Congregational Church.

"Mr. Bryant," writes Mr. John C. Gray, the orator of the occasion, "was extremely modest and unassuming in his deportment. . . . It [the poem] was read quietly, and perhaps with some monotony of manner, so that unless one gave a close attention, it did not produce its full effect . . . but persons of discernment, who followed the thought without requiring an effective or powerful manner, or a clear and strong delivery, felt that Mr. Bryant's poem was an uncommon production. It placed him, as I thought, at the very head of American poets — and there has been, as I still think, his rightful place ever since. The audience was a distinguished one — a formidable one for a young man to front — John Quincy Adams, Timothy Pickering, John Lowell, Drs. Channing and Kirkland, Everett, Dana, Shaw, and a multitude of others."

Without reaching the distinction of that later occasion when Emerson read his essay on *The American Scholar* before the same society, this appearance of Bryant before the Phi Beta Kappa nevertheless marks almost as distinctly an epoch in American literature. For the first time probably in this country there was read before an important academic body a poem written, not in a classical metre, but in one of the forms of the older English literature that has been revived under the influence of the romantic movement. The poem itself is romantic and picturesque in treatment, and, although somewhat didactic in tone, is characterized by bold and striking imagery. The theme, as the title indicates, is the progress of man and civilization

through the ages, and the object is to show the triumph of virtue and liberty and peace in the new country of America. Of all Bryant's poems it is the most ambitious, but although fine in passages, it is inferior as a whole to the best of his shorter pieces and would not live save in association with them.

The success of *The Ages* made Bryant's Boston friends wish to have it in print, and before he left the city they had prevailed upon him to authorize its publication and that of his other verses. The result was a little pamphlet of forty-four pages, bound modestly in brown paper boards, and containing eight poems, as follows: *The Ages, To a Waterfowl, Translation of a Fragment of Simonides, Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood, The Yellow Violet, Song* (*The Hunter of the West*), *Green River* and *Thanatopsis.* This does not include all the poems he had written up to this date, 1821, or even all of these that he included in subsequent editions. We note the omission of *The Burial Place, A Winter Piece, Oh, Fairest of the Rural Maids, The West Wind, Hymn to Death* and *A Walk at Sunset.* The best of his work was, however, fairly represented by the selection. Here, for the first time, *Thanatopsis* appeared in the form in which we now have it, Bryant having written both an introduction and a conclusion for a poem which, as it was originally printed, was but a fragment, beginning with a half-line, "Yet a few days," etc., and ending with another half-line, "And make their bed with thee."

The book, naturally, met with its most enthusiastic reception in the *North American Review*, where the poet's friend, Mr. Willard Phillips, praised it in terms that many thought exaggerated, and attributed, no

doubt, to those methods of literary log-rolling that are practised in every period. At least one other critic, however, Gulian C. Verplanck, in a quarter, New York, where Bryant had no personal relations, and where up to this time his name was still an unfamiliar one, joined in the small chorus of praise that greeted the appearance of the volume, and the year following there was even a favourable reference to Bryant's work in *Blackwood's Magazine*, where it was stated as the belief of the reviewer that "Bryant is no mean poet; and, if he is a young man, we should not be surprised at his assuming, one day or another, a high rank among English poets."

The volume was a small one, but its publication was a significant event in our literary history. It marks the birth of American poetry just as surely as Irving's *Sketch-Book* marks the birth of American prose literature. Already, in 1819, there had been published the *Croaker* poems of Drake and Halleck, *Fanny*, by the second of these poets, and Hillhouse's *Percy's Masque*. But while all these were the work of the poets of the younger generation, none of them is of such significance as Bryant's little collection, or indicates so prophetically the full meaning of the new creative impulse that was making itself felt throughout the country. Yet it is important to note that Bryant did not make his appearance solitary and unattended. He represented a general poetic awakening, and with him the poets we have just mentioned, as well as Dr. Percival, whose *Poems* appeared the same year as Bryant's pamphlet, and Brainard, whose *Occasional Poems* was published some four years later, together form a group more or less homogeneous in ideals and aspira-

tions. All, with the exception of Hillhouse, who was a dramatic poet, are stirred by a common love of the native landscape, and all attempt to describe this landscape not in the set terms of conventional nature poetry, but with the faithful adherence to its own actual characteristics. As a group these poets have retained but a minor place in American literature. For the most part, their memories are merged in the greater individual memory of Bryant, who stands forth by himself as the significant figure of the first period of American poetry. At the precise moment of which we have been writing, and for no inconsiderable period thereafter, his superiority was not so clear to all of his contemporaries, and he had to share his reputation with Drake and Halleck, Percival and Brainard. But none the less the appearance of Bryant, which was definitely marked by the collection of 1821, was for the age, consciously or unconsciously, the great determining event in its literary history. Percival and Brainard both became followers, if not imitators, of Bryant, and even Longfellow generously admitted his indebtedness to the author of *Thanatopsis*.

CHAPTER VI

ON THE THRESHOLD

When his book appeared, Bryant was already back at Great Barrington. In spite of his success, he still seems resolved to regard the law as his true vocation, and for a year or two nothing came from his pen. Instead of writing poetry, in his moments of leisure, he devoted himself to the study of political economy, thereby laying the basis of his future participation in national politics. Even then were arising new issues, which gave his reading of Ricardo and Adam Smith a certain timely significance. From the end of Jefferson's administration, in 1804, down to the close of the War of 1812, people and statesmen alike had been almost exclusively concerned with the foreign affairs of the nation. The war between France and Great Britain, involving all Europe, was felt in the United States almost as much as if we ourselves had been at war with one or the other of these powers. Our wealth was in our commerce, and this was at the mercy of those monstrous paper blockades declared by both France and England, and covering nearly every important port in the world. Statecraft was therefore principally employed in negotiating with foreign powers for the privilege of trade, and party alignments were drawn on the basis of friendship for one of the two great principals in the conflict. This was the political

atmosphere in which Bryant had been reared and which had limited his outlook on public questions. Now, however, matters had changed. During the War of 1812, American manufactures had been developed, and after peace had been declared, they began to clamour for protection. The very Federalists who had attacked the Embargo and the war itself as restraints on trade, now that their capital was withdrawn from shipping and invested in home products, demanded a new restriction, in the shape of a protective tariff. Bryant, as we have seen, was originally an ardent Federalist, and had opposed the policy of the Republican presidents in their course which had resulted in the war with Great Britain. But he now began to be infected with the new British theories of free trade, of which his friend Theodore Sedgwick was an exponent, and to drift away from his party. There was no opportunity as yet to declare himself, but when, later, as editor of the *Evening Post*, he was forced into the political arena, he had no hesitation in throwing off his old allegiance and coming out for the Republican or, as it then began to be called, the Democratic party.

Dana, in Boston, looked askance at Bryant's absorption in these political and economic studies, and wrote, urging him not to neglect his poetry. He was particularly anxious to have him set about writing a long poem, longer than *The Ages*, which he seemed to think was necessary to establish his reputation on a firm basis. Bryant did not respond to these entreaties, and for several years Dana continues his insistence on this point, quoting the opinion of Cooper and others to the same effect. At one time the poet seems actually to

have taken the matter under consideration, for a little later he did project and commence writing upon a long narrative poem, the subject of which was the phantom ship recorded by Cotton Mather in his *Magnalia Christi*. But Bryant was soon convinced of his unfitness for this style of composition and abandoned the attempt. Later in life, he seems to have taken the position, familiarly associated with Poe, that a long poem is an artistic impossibility. There is, however, no need to hold any such opinion in order to understand Bryant's own failure in narrative verse. His faculty, as judged by the great body of his verse, is entirely descriptive, and had little in it of the narrative or dramatic. He could sometimes tell a simple story in verse with considerable power and feeling, but he had neither the art nor the imaginative grasp for a work involving elaborate characters and situations. Almost equally impossible for him would have been a long meditative and descriptive poem like Cowper's *Task* or Wordsworth's *Excursion*. He lacked fulness and flow of mind quite as surely as he lacked narrative and dramatic instinct. His inspiration visited him in brief illuminations. His ideas came singly and did not suggest those endless vistas that open up in the minds of other poets. It is not unnatural, therefore, that he should have come to entertain the idea that there was no such thing as a long poem. For him there was not; so that if he had persisted in trying to write one, his inspiration would have forsaken him entirely. And yet it has been suggested that Bryant's poems in reality all form parts of a single long poem. Seen thus collectively and like the *Æneid*, under the aspect of a meditation upon life and as an embodiment

of the sense of the destiny of a race, his work as a whole may indeed not untruthfully be characterized as the Puritan epic of New England.

It is curious that a poet who knew so well how to take the measure of his limitations in one direction should have failed conspicuously in the estimate of his abilities in another. But, though his experience of the stage was so limited that Mr. Godwin thinks it uncertain if up to this time he had ever seen a play, Bryant now set about writing a farce on the subject of duelling, a practice that still survived in political circles. Nobody will deny the excellence of Bryant's intention in seeking to bring ridicule upon this barbarous custom, and the play itself, which was entitled *The Heroes*, in patent imitation of Sheridan's *Rivals*, is said not to have been without some merits. These, however, such as they were, failed to impress Henry Sedgwick, to whom the farce was submitted, but it led to a suggestion on the part of the critic that Bryant should come to New York to visit him and to see what opening there might be for him there as a magazine writer.

Bryant had visited New York once before, but on business and for one night only, and he had seen little or nothing of the life of the place. Now, although this time too his stay was brief, he was pleasantly entertained and met as many authors as he had previously in Boston. Of Cooper, who was present at one dinner, Bryant wrote home to his wife, "Mr. Cooper engrossed the whole conversation, and seems a little giddy with the great success his works have met with." Bryant himself was not unappreciated. In fact, the young country poet seems to have been

somewhat of a lion and to have made an excellent impression.

"He seems so modest," writes Miss Sedgwick, in a letter to her brother, "that every one is eager to prove to him the merit of which he is unconscious." The same writer goes on to describe a scene in which he figured: —

"I wish you had seen him last evening. Mrs. Nicholas was here and half a dozen gentlemen. She was ambitious to recite before Bryant. She was very becomingly dressed for the grand ball to which she was going, and, wrought up to the highest pitch of excitement, she recited her favourite pieces better than I have ever heard her, and concluded the whole, without request or any note of preparation, with *The Waterfowl* and *Thanatopsis*. Bryant's face brightened all over, was one gleam of light, and, I am certain, at the moment he felt the ecstasy of a poet."

No opening offered itself, so Bryant returned once more to Great Barrington. He had, however, the less reason to regret this necessary retreat, that an opportunity to write, and even to augment his income by writing, now came from another quarter. A critique that he had written of Dana's *Idle Man* had been rejected by the *North American Review*, which had passed from the hands of his friends into those of Edward Everett and another, representatives of the survival of the older classical taste and out of sympathy with the new naturalistic movement. But in 1823 a new periodical, *The United States Literary Gazette*, was established in Boston, and its editor, Theophilus Parsons, himself a poet of distinction and later to win high honours in the legal profession, begged Bryant to contribute. When asked to name his price, Bryant had suggested two dollars apiece for his poems as a fair

compensation; but the publishers, who evidently regarded him as a valuable auxiliary and wished to assure themselves of his services, made him an offer of two hundred dollars a year for an average of one hundred lines a month. These munificent terms Bryant accepted, and from the end of 1823 to the middle of 1825 he wrote between twenty and thirty pieces for the *Gazette*.

This was an unusually large output for Bryant, whose collection in 1821 contained but eight poems in all, and, indeed, this year and a half constitutes the period of Bryant's greatest poetic productivity. The regular engagement justified his devotion to his favourite pursuit. He did not cease to apply himself earnestly to the practice of his profession, but the old idea of exclusive allegiance was well-nigh abandoned, and in a measure it may be said that the strife which had so long been maintained between law and literature was now definitely decided in favour of the latter. It was with a sense of exultation that Bryant again took up his pen, an exultation that finds expression in the little lyric which runs: —

"I broke the spell that held me long,
The dear, dear witchery of song.
I said, the poet's idle lore
Shall waste my prime of years no more.
For Poetry, though heavenly born,
Consorts with poverty and scorn.

"I broke the spell — nor deemed its power
Could fetter me another hour.
Ah thoughtless! how could I forget
Its causes were around me yet?
For wheresoe'er I looked, the while,
Was Nature's everlasting smile.

"Still came and lingered on my sight
Of flowers and streams the bloom and light,
And glory of the stars and sun; —
And these and poetry are one.
They, ere the world had held me long,
Recalled me to the love of song."

Such, in a general way, are the themes on which Bryant continues to write; but there are variations, as when his interest in the Greek struggle for independence inspired such poems as *The Massacre at Scio* and *Song of the Greek Amazon*, or when, as in *Monument Mountain*, he interweaves with his description of that rugged eminence an Indian legend of the country-side. Indian lore had a special appeal to Bryant's fancy, as it had to some of his predecessors, like Freneau, and there are several pieces among these later poems that have titles like *The Indian Girl's Lament*, *An Indian Story*, etc. In one poem of this character, *An Indian at the Burial Place of his Fathers*, there is an impressive picture of the native exile gazing on the peaceful pastoral scene with regret for the passing of the ancient wildness and his own race. At the end he indulges in a prophecy in which Bryant himself sounds a note of warning, the need of which had already become only too apparent in many parts of our country: —

"But I behold a fearful sign,
To which the white men's eyes are blind;
Their race may vanish hence, like mine,
And leave no trace behind,
Save ruin, o'er the regions spread,
And the white stones above the dead.

"Before these fields were shorn and tilled,
Full to the brim our rivers flowed;

The melody of waters filled
The fresh and boundless wood;
And torrents dashed and rivulets played,
And fountains spouted in the shade.

"These grateful sounds are heard no more,
The springs are silent in the sun;
The rivers, by the blackened shore,
With lessening current run;
The realms our tribes are crushed to get
May be a barren desert yet."

Bryant's Indian is merely a conventional heroic figure, with little external or psychological reality. He had quite possibly never seen an Indian in his life, and he knew nothing of their customs or character. He had merely a sentimental interest in their fate, and he left to Longfellow the task of writing the one poem in our literature, *Hiawatha*, in which the Indian, with all he loved and stood for, is preserved to the remembrance of posterity. Yet for Bryant the aboriginal past of America contributed something very definite to the sentiment of the landscape, and the complete disappearance of the earlier race, which had left its bones under the soil for the ploughs of the settlers to turn up in their fields, gave his mind an imaginative starting-point for that conception of the earth as a sepulchre which possessed so great a fascination for him.

Many of his poems continue to deal with death. The story of *Rizpah*, from the Old Testament, afforded a theme for the treatment of a subject more grim and forbidding than usually attracted him. More characteristic is *The Old Man's Funeral*, in which death is compared with the harvest and is praised as the peaceful and fitting end of a long and happy life:

"And I am glad that he has lived thus long,
And glad that he has gone to his reward;
Nor can I deem that Nature did him wrong
Softly to disengage the vital cord.
For when his hand grew palsied, and his eye
Dark with the mists of age, it was his time to die."

Frequently he loved to meditate upon his own death, and it is always in the same mood of serenity and calm, with no anticipation of bitterness and no surging in upon him of regret at the inexorableness of the fate which awaits, not man alone, but all nature. That not even when he dies shall he be separated from those scenes of natural beauty which he loves, and that by his grave all life shall continue in those forms and aspects which were dear to him, go far toward making him almost in love with death, as it would seem, in the last lines of *The Rivulet:*—

"And I shall sleep—and on thy side,
As ages after ages glide,
Children their early sports shall try,
And bow to hoary age and die.
But thou, unchanged from year to year,
Gayly shalt play and glitter here;
Amid young flowers and tender grass
Thy endless infancy shall pass;
And singing down thy narrow glen,
Shalt mock the fading race of men."

The same feeling finds even finer expression in that lovely lyric, *June,* which has been praised by Poe for the sweetness and tenderness of its sentiment. Not in winter, when all is cold and the ground frozen, would the poet wish to be laid at rest, but

"'Twere pleasant, that in flowery June,
When brooks send up a cheerful tune
And groves a joyous sound,

> The sexton's hand, my grave to make,
> The soft, green mountain turf should break."

There is something jocund and Elizabethan in the feeling and in its expression that would seem at variance with the subject were it not for the simple sincerity that makes the mood the most natural in the world.

The love of nature that is made the vehicle in these poems of a simple human sentiment or emotion finds utterance more impersonal, but no less imaginative, in such other pieces as *Summer Wind*, *After a Tempest*, *Autumn Woods*, *March* and *November*. These may be characterized as descriptive poems of nature, and display power of a high order in their ability, as Poe expresses it, "to endow nature with sentience and a capability of action," an instance of which may be seen in the following lines from *Summer Wind* :—

> "All is silent, save the faint
> And interrupted murmur of the bee,
> Settling on the sick flowers, and then again
> Instantly on the wing. The plants around
> Feel the too potent fervours: the tall maize
> Rolls up its long green leaves; the clover droops
> Its tender foliage, and declines its bloom.
> But far in the fierce sunshine tower the hills,
> With all their growth of woods, silent and stern,
> As if the scorching heat and dazzling light
> Were but an element they loved."

In spite of the "pathetic fallacy" of the last two lines, it would be difficult to find in the whole range of poetry a more perfect example of the imaginative rendering of an impression of external nature than is contained in this passage. As in Tennyson's

"Moan of doves in immemorial elms
And murmur of innumerable bees,"

no small measure of the effectiveness of this rendering is due to the echo of sound to sense:—

"The faint
And interrupted murmur of the bee
Settling on the sick flowers."

Such writing represents an advance in art over the *Inscription* and the *Waterfowl*, and marks the attainment by Bryant of his maturest and most imaginative manner.

The Song of the Stars, *To a Cloud* and *Hymn to the North Star* are poems of greater fancifulness than those we have just mentioned, and display an attempt less to represent nature than to idealize it. Thus the stars sing:—

"Away, away! in our blossoming bowers,
In the soft airs wrapping these spheres of ours,
In the seas and fountains that shine with morn,
See, Love is brooding, and Life is born,
And breathing myriads are breaking from night,
To rejoice, like us, in motion and light."

The cloud is an "air-borne car" from which the poet would look down on Andalusia and Italy and all other fair places of the earth; but it is also, in its transiency, a symbol of the inevitable fading of all mortal beauty. In the same spirit, the north star, which in its steadfastness supplies the mariner with a compass, is

"A beauteous type of that unchanging good,
That bright eternal beacon, by whose ray
The voyager of time should shape his heedful way."

More interesting than this fanciful and idealistic treatment of nature, which expresses itself in ideas more or less common to the poetry of all ages, is Bryant's exposition of his religion of nature in *A Forest Hymn*. This differs from Wordsworth's in being characteristically theological and Christian, while that of the English poet is rather philosophical, pagan and pantheistic. For both, nature is full of divine influences for the receptive human spirit. But for Wordsworth, who regarded God and nature as one, the former being immanent in the latter, these influences are the natural impulses imparted to every living object by its environment; whereas for Bryant, the product of Puritanism, who saw in man and nature alike not God Himself, but the creations of God, they are rather the soul's perceptions of His goodness and greatness revealed in the sublime evidences of His handiwork. Hence Bryant worships God, not in the forest, but through the forest, which becomes a vast temple divinely ordained for this purpose. The stately majesty and antique grandeur of the great trees by which he is surrounded, raise his spirit to the highest pitch of religious exaltation, while the solemn silence of the leafy solitude brings him into the very presence of his Maker. In all this there is actually some repetition of the earliest religious experiences of the race. The groves were in fact, as in fancy, God's first temples before the earth was denuded and the stars were revealed as new objects of human adoration. Therefore there subsists in the *Forest Hymn*, beneath its doctrine of Puritan theology, a certain primitiveness of religious feeling, some survival of the druidism of prehistoric men.

Besides the poems that we have already specified,

Bryant[1] wrote, during this period, from 1823 to 1825, the *Hymn of the Waldenses*, *Mutation*, *The Lapse of Time*, *Love's Seasons*, *The Murdered Traveller* and an *Ode for an Agricultural Celebration*. One other poem he wrote also, one that had a tender personal inspiration. This was the sonnet *To* ——, in which he addresses his sister, then in the last stages of consumption. This sister, considerably younger than himself, had been the object of a peculiarly deep attachment on his part, and it was with inexpressible sadness that he watched her gradual decay. "Death," he writes,

> "should come
> Gently, to one of gentle mould like thee,
> As light winds wandering through groves of flowers
> Detach the delicate blossom from the tree."

Death did come shortly after, and in *The Death of the Flowers*, written the year following, after his removal to New York, there is this exquisite tribute to her memory: —

> "And then I think of one who in her youthful beauty died,
> The fair meek blossom that grew up and faded by my side.

[1] The poems that Bryant contributed to *The United States Literary Gazette*, both at this time and during the next year or two, were later included in a little volume of the verse by various hands, that had appeared in that periodical. This collection is now one of the rarities most eagerly sought by collectors of Americana. But its rareness is not all from the bibliographical point of view. In it, besides these poems of Bryant's, are the earliest productions of a young poet who signed his contributions "H. W. L." It is the first general representation of American poetry in its earliest stage of vital growth, and it is characterized by a sweetness and freshness that bear witness to the sound sanity of the inspiration of which it was the expression. America may have produced greater work since, but it has no need to be ashamed of its beginnings in the early poems of Bryant and Longfellow.

In the cold, moist earth we laid her, when the forests cast the leaf,
And we wept that one so lovely should have a life so brief:
Yet not unmeet it was that one, like that young friend of ours,
So gentle and so beautiful, should perish with the flowers."

Of the poet himself during the period of his life at Great Barrington, — a period which was now drawing to a close, — his habits, his tastes, his interests — outside of the law and poetry — his personal appearance and, above all, the impression that he made upon his friends and neighbours, we possess ample material from a portrait in the recollections furnished Mr. Godwin, by the few of these who still survived at the time when he was engaged upon his biography of the poet. One recalled "his solitary, brooding habits, and his dislike of his occupation; his love of the thickets along Green River and the Housatonic; and his restrained, almost austere manner with strangers, contrasted with his cheerful, entertaining, joyous way among his friends." Another remembered that "he was simple and scrupulously neat in his dress, wearing commonly blue cloth made in city fashion, which to rustic taste seemed a little dandified. Occasionally he attended evening parties, and took part in games and frolics, but was never demonstrative, and much less hilarious. The young women liked his bright eyes and clustering light brown hair, and 'set their caps for him.' . . . He drank wine now and then, but was rigidly temperate in both eating and drinking, making his diet chiefly of fruits and vegetables, and his beverage of milk and water"

As to his manner and bearing, one writer, a woman, testified that "a more perfect gentleman never existed; and yet he had a strange fondness for talking with queer and common people, — farmers, woodmen and

stage-drivers. He would crack his jokes with them any time, and yet seemed to avoid more respectable people." One of these odd acquaintances whom Bryant picked up was an old Frenchman, an officer in Napoleon's army, from whom he acquired a knowledge both of fencing and of the French language.

Mr. Godwin was as indefatigable in unearthing evidence as a district attorney, and his industry was well rewarded. One Colonel Taylor proved a mine of piquant reminiscences: —

"Colonel Taylor says he liked to wander most of anything, and when he met an acquaintance his first relation was, 'Come, what say you for a stroll?' — which stroll, once begun, was apt to last the greater part of the day." "He was a passionate botanist," adds the same authority; "he knew the name of every tree, flower and spire of grass; and was curious, also, about the antiquities of every place. . . . He relished a joke heartily — even broad jokes — got off some of his own, and his laugh, when he did laugh, began with a queer chuckle, spread gradually over the whole face, and finally shook him all over like an ague." "He was commonly gentle, courteous and polite; but he allowed of no familiarities; and impertinence or vulgarism he rebuked on the spot, no matter who the offender. . . . In court he often lost his self-control when provoked by adversaries; and on one occasion a neighbour met him bouncing out of the door, almost white with rage, and exclaiming: 'If old Whiting says that again, I will thrash him within an inch of his life.'"

"The fun of this," continues Mr. Godwin's informant, the same Colonel Taylor, "was that while Mr. Bryant was spare, almost diminutive in size, the

other fellow, General Whiting, was quite a giant. Little as he was, however, he was fearless, and would have undertaken, and done it, too, if he liked." In the next breath follows the somewhat inconsequent bit of information that "he was punctual in going to church, owning half a pew in the Congregational Church, but he was terribly prone to pick the sermons to pieces."

One other anecdote recorded by Mr. Godwin adds a vivid personal touch to the portrait: "It is told of Mr. Bryant that once, as he approached a group of village youths, one of them exclaimed, 'See Bryant; because he is a poet he wears his shirt collar turned over in imitation of Byron!' 'Silence, sir!' was the poet's only response; 'poor Byron is now no more,' and his eyes moistened as he spoke."

As far as Bryant was from Byron in the general sentiment of his work, and as far as his art is on the whole from the influence of that poet, the spirit of liberty which lifted Byron's verse and his life alike above the level of mere selfish voluptuousness, could not fail to strike a responsive note in the heart of the American poet. It is Halleck, not Bryant, who reflects the full force of Byron's influence on American poetry; but though the former wrote *Marco Bozzaris*, the latter wrote *The Greek Partisan* and *The Massacre at Scio*, inferior poems, but expressive of the equal sympathy with which all three watched, in a mood of passionate exaltation, the movement that in all modern times has most stirred men's hearts with a disinterested and ideal enthusiasm, the Greek struggle for liberty.

CHAPTER VII

A NEW ENGLAND KNICKERBOCKER

TOWARD the end of 1824 Bryant made his final determination to abandon the law and to devote himself exclusively to writing. Even among his literary friends there were those who attempted to dissuade him from such a step and who argued most wisely that it was in the highest degree hazardous to give up a career in which success was certain, for one in which the possibility of making a bare living was at best very doubtful. Bryant seems to have made his final decision as much upon the grounds of principle as of expediency. For his dislike of the law had gradually grown into positive abhorrence. In the first place a moral scruple stood as an obstacle in the way of his success. Others might urge that the apparent dishonesty often required of a lawyer who is called upon to defend unjust causes was a fallacy, inasmuch as there was never a cause that was wholly without a shadow of justification. But there was a sophistry about this that did not satisfy Bryant, who, with the Puritan sense of right and wrong, was thus hampered and restricted in his acceptance of cases. Moreover, he experienced a growing disgust at the failure of legal machinery to secure justice, even when the merits of a case were, to a common-sense view, most apparent.

In addition to this question of the law, Bryant

seems to have had other reasons for being anxious to leave Great Barrington. There are references in his letters to sources of irritation arising from "innumerable quarrels and factions which were springing up every day among an extremely excitable and not very enlightened population." As a matter of fact, he was beginning to feel the narrowness and provincialism of his present sphere of life, and to long for a wider field of activity, at whatever cost to his immediate comfort and convenience. After all, what he would be leaving behind was not so very great. He himself says that his practice, successful as it was, brought him in an annual income of only five hundred dollars, and it did not seem likely that he could do worse even in the ill-paid field of literature.

Had Bryant broken away a few years earlier, he would undoubtedly have chosen Boston as the field of his operations. Boston was the goal of his earliest desires; it had given him his first friends and his first recognition and encouragement as a poet; it was the seat of Federalism, to which party he still owed nominal allegiance, and, more important, of Unitarianism, for which, like his father, he had renounced the Calvinistic doctrines of his Puritan ancestors. Moreover, up to 1820 or thereabouts, Boston had been the intellectual, and so far as the country had one, the literary, centre of America. It still maintained a real intellectual supremacy over the rest of the country, and among the group of his friends at Cambridge, Bryant could have enjoyed intercourse with a society superior, in the quality of its cultivation and in the broadness of its intellectual horizon, to that of any other community in America. But Bryant was not

thinking of the advantages to himself of a congenial society. He was forced to consider where there would be the best opening for a struggling poet and man of letters, with no resources but those of his mind on which to rely for the support of himself and his family; and under the circumstances New York seemed far more likely than Boston to give him that opening.

During the last few years, or since about 1819, New York had forged rapidly to the front as a literary centre. Previous to that date she had been far more provincial and of less importance than either Boston or Philadelphia, or even other still smaller cities, like Hartford and New Haven, each of which, at one time or another, had been a gathering-point for those local literary disturbances that presaged a wakening of the national artistic consciousness. In 1819, however, Irving published his *Sketch-Book*, and in 1821 Cooper published *The Spy*, and as both books achieved a tremendous success here and abroad, and were followed by others scarcely less successful, by the same writers, New York was immediately lifted out of its local obscurity as the home of Dutch and English bourgeois merchants, into the first rank as a centre of literary activity. Already, also, a little group had grown up under cover of these two leading figures, and had created something of a literary society. These were more nearly Bryant's contemporaries than any other American writers. One of them, like him, was by birth a native of New England. This was Fitz-Greene Halleck. Four years older than Bryant, Halleck was born at Guilford, Connecticut, in 1790. He was descended on his mother's side from John Eliot, the

translator of the Bible into the Indian language; but, although Bryant found in him a certain persistency of temper that he attributed to his Puritan stock, he had little else to remind one of his ancestry or indeed of his New England origin. Bryant retained to the last a touch of native rusticity, but Halleck seemed in the highest degree the finished product of city society and traditions. Graceful and sprightly in mind and in manner, he was the type of the town wit and elegant, "the Horace," as Bryant once called him in an after-dinner speech, "of this opulent, populous, luxuriant Rome of the Western Hemisphere." Like Horace, too, he had his Mæcenas, whom he found in the person of John Jacob Astor, the merchant prince of the city, and in whose establishment he served in the capacity of head clerk. He led an easy, irresponsible sort of existence, writing very little, but achieving a popularity that in his day Poe rated third only to that of Bryant and Longfellow.

Associated with Halleck had been Drake, a younger man, who died in 1820, and who thus does not come into our story. Drake and Halleck together had written in 1819 a series of poetical satires called *The Croaker Papers*, that had appeared in the *Evening Post*. Drake was a New Yorker by birth, and so was Gulian C. Verplanck, another member of the group with which Bryant was to be henceforth associated. He was of mingled Dutch, French and English ancestry. On his father's side he was descended from the early settlers of New Amsterdam, and thus represented that decaying Dutch society at which Irving had poked fun in his *Knickerbocker's History of New York*. The Verplancks were one of the families that

had retained their wealth and importance, since, as Tories, they had escaped the confiscation of their vast ancestral estates on the Hudson, at Fishkill, during the Revolution. Verplanck's mother, on the other hand, was a daughter of William Samuel Johnson of Stratford, Connecticut, who had been the first president of Columbia College, and whose father, Samuel Johnson, had been the first president of that institution before the Revolution, when it was known as King's College. Verplanck himself was a graduate of Columbia. His interests lay in the domains of law and theology, and by the time Bryant came to New York he had already written two treatises, one on the *Evidences of Christianity*, and the other on the *Doctrine of Contracts*. In literature he was an encourager of others rather than himself a producer, and as such he played an important part in the life of the city, until he went into politics.

Other young men of letters were Sands, who had already published a romantic Indian poem, *Yamoyden;* Percival the poet, who was Bryant's chief rival at the moment; and Hillhouse, author of a play, *Percy's Masque*, which the author had sent to Bryant for revision and which the latter had reviewed favourably in the *North American Review*.

Such, roughly, was the personnel of New York's literary coterie. There were other men of talent and distinction who went to make up the literary society of the place, — lawyers like Henry Sedgwick, professors at Columbia and at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, publishers, editors and artists. There was a touch of fashionableness and Bohemianism about the whole such as is inseparable from literary society in a

large city and which has always been peculiarly characteristic of New York. All mingled on free terms in clubs and public places, and the literature that was produced, and that was chiefly of the light satirical order, was the expression of the social life of the city. This was at once its charm and its limitation. Of profound personal expression there was little. Under the intense activity of the place there lay a stagnation of ideas. Intellectually, New York was more than conservative. Columbia College, the centre of intellectual life, was also the mainstay of conformity and did little to widen the horizon of the community. It had many scholars, some of them preëminent in their several domains, but all content to lead a life of quiet academic indulgence in the lines that were laid out for them.

One cannot help thinking that such a *milieu* had its effect on Bryant and perhaps limited his achievement. In Boston or Cambridge he would have felt the stir of intellectual life about him, and his poetry, perfect in form, might have gained in depth and feeling. His education, though sound classically, had been narrow, and his spiritual resources were not great. Just how much these were capable of being increased by liberal intercourse with minds more cultivated than his own, one can, of course, only conjecture. But in New York there was not even the possibility of such a benefit to be derived from his associates. With the exception of Cooper — Irving was living at this time in Europe — he was the undoubted superior of any one he was likely to meet in that city. He might gain in polish, and everything social in his nature would be cultivated and strengthened. But in so far as he was a poet whose inspiration was mainly moral and religious, he would

be thrown back, still more even than in Cummington and Great Barrington, upon his own native instincts and the tradition of his early religious training, if indeed, in the sterile atmosphere of an unideal community, these were not actually dulled and blunted.

Bryant visited New York in January, 1825, and again in February, but without anything being brought about by his friends in his behalf. The project that was entertained by them, and on which Bryant's hopes hung, was the establishment of a literary magazine under the auspices of the new Athenæum Society. Another visit to New York was necessary, however, before anything was accomplished. It was then proposed, according to the familiar recipe of the time in the magazine world, of combination and recombination, to merge two unsuccessful periodicals, *The Atlantic Magazine* and *The Literary Review*, into a third, the name of which was to be *The New York Review and Athenæum Magazine*. As editors it was to have Mr. Henry Anderson of the old *Atlantic* and William Cullen Bryant. Prospectuses were issued, and the date of publication was set for June. Bryant does not appear to have been particularly charmed by the prospect, for he wrote to Dana: "I have given up my profession, which was a shabby one, and I am not altogether certain that I have got into a better. Bliss & White, however, the publishers of the *New York Review*, employ me, which at present will be livelihood, and a livelihood is all I got from the law."

Dana responded by sending him a poem, his first. Halleck sent his *Marco Bozzaris*. Bryant's own principal contribution to the first number was the

poem, *A Song of Pitcairn's Island.* He opened the number with a review of Hillhouse's new Biblical drama, *Hadad.* He was to have his fill now for a time of the drudgery of hack work and reviewing. The burden of the editorial labours fell on him rather than upon his associates, Sands and Anderson, and through the long, hot summer, the first he ever had passed in town, he toiled away with patience, but with many passionate longings, no doubt, for the cool and quiet of the country and for his wife and baby at Great Barrington, where it was thought best to leave them until his place in New York should be thoroughly assured. That he tried to make the best of his situation is shown in his letters. He sends encouraging accounts of his health, the improvement in which he inclines optimistically to attribute to the dry air of the city at night, which permits him to sleep with the window open at the head of his bed. He speaks in good terms of his boarding-house, chosen because it was kept by a Frenchman, for the sake of the language, and of his host himself, in whom he humorously made the interesting discovery, no doubt very broadening to the mind, that a good Catholic could be a good Christian. The house was situated in Chambers Street, in view of the North River. The city had not yet begun to climb northward, and this situation, although within the limits, was removed from the congested district in which epidemics of yellow fever were frequent. One other advantage was the proximity of the Unitarian church, in the same street, which Bryant attended pretty regularly. The sect had had some difficulty in getting a foothold in New York owing to the conservative spirit of the inhabitants,

mostly of the Episcopal church, who regarded its doctrines as heretical and had tried to keep Dr. Channing from speaking. Mr. Godwin thinks that Bryant's Unitarianism was an obstacle in the way of receiving a start in New York. None of his new associates, except the Sedgwicks, were in agreement with his religious principles. Halleck, indeed, had very few religious convictions whatsoever, excepting for purposes of disputation, when he usually defended the most extreme opinions with respect to the advantage of an established church and of monarchy, out of sheer perversity. But Verplanck was an Episcopalian and a theologian, and occupied a chair as Professor of the Evidences of Christianity in the General Seminary. This difference, however, did not interfere with friendly intercourse between Bryant and the men whose society was most agreeable, and amid the labours of editing there are glimpses of social relaxation —*soirées* at which he met, among others, Captain, later Sir, John Franklin, of Arctic fame, and evenings at the Bread and Cheese Club, founded by Cooper, which for the country poet must have been delightfully Bohemian.

But though Bryant could count on the friendship of those whom he met in his new environment, he could not always count on their coöperation. He writes in a letter to Dana: —

"It is true, as you say, that there is a want of *literary entertainment* in our journal. But as to the multitude of clever men here who might furnish it, let me say that we have some clever men, to be sure, but they are naughtily given to instructing the world, to elucidating the mysteries of political economy and the principles of jurisprudence, etc.; they seem to think it a sort of disgrace to be entertaining. Since the time of *Salmagundi*, the city has grown exceedingly grave

and addicted to sordid speculations. Paulding sometimes writes for our magazine, and we pick up the rest of it as well as we can."

The *Salmagundi* was a small periodical started in 1807 by Washington Irving, his elder brother William, and James K. Paulding. Its chief mission had been to satirize the humours of the time, and it had contributed considerably to the gayety of the town, which was just beginning to assume the air of a metropolis. With the desertion of New York by Irving and the death in 1820 of Drake, who with Halleck in *The Croaker Papers* had continued the tradition of *Salmagundi*, the literary life of New York had suffered somewhat of an eclipse. Bryant had come to New York at a moment of depression. He found the men of talent maintaining the forms and traditions of a literary society, but indulging in little production. He discovered a curious thing about many of them. It was not that they lacked seriousness, but that they did not take literature very seriously. Writing was for them a plaything, a pastime; and when the time for playing was over, they gave their more concentrated attention to other matters, to politics, theology, economics and classical scholarship. For Bryant, who took his poetry with great seriousness, and who had abandoned a profession to adopt a literary career, this, no doubt, was disheartening. Furthermore, it could not but in the long run have its effect upon himself. In a city where literature was cultivated not so much for its own sake as for social considerations, and where every man must have the footing of a more prosaic occupation, he could hardly expect to escape the common fate and become a man of affairs first and a poet afterward. Already

the effect of these influences, of association with such men as Sands and Halleck, is discernible in a certain note of trifling in his verse of this period. In poems like *To a Mosquito*, and *A Meditation on Rhode Island Coal*, we see Bryant trying to catch the prevailing spirit of levity, but without success, for never were productions more inane and insipid. Bryant was trying too late to assume the tone of town wit, and how near New York came to ruining a true poet may be seen in such a stanza as that in which he follows the flight of the mosquito to the city: —

"At length thy pinions fluttered in Broadway —
Ah, there were fairy steps, and white necks kissed
By wanton airs, and eyes whose killing ray
Shone through the snowy veils like stars through mist;
And fresh as morn in May on cheek and chin,
Bloomed the bright blood through the transparent skin."

Fortunately for him and his poetry, there were occasional visits to Great Barrington and Cummington to refresh his memory of the country and to renew in him its deeper influences; and as a result we have such poems as *The Firmament* and *Lines on Revisiting the Country*, through which the purer current of his inspiration flows freely as before. In the second of these poems there are stanzas as exquisite as any he ever wrote, although there may be thought to be more than a suggestion of Wordsworth in them: —

"A lisping voice and glancing eyes are near,
And ever restless feet of one who now
Gathers the blossoms of her fourth bright year;
There plays a gladness o'er her fair young brow
As breaks the varied scene upon her sight,
Upheaved and spread in verdure and in light.

"For I have taught her, with delighted eye,
To gaze upon the mountains,— to behold,
With deep affection, the pure ample sky,
And clouds along its blue abysses rolled,
To love the song of waters, and to hear
The melody of winds with charmèd ear."

Even in town he turns to the thought of nature as in *The Firmament*, when he writes: —

"Oh, when, amid the throng of men,
The heart grows sick of hollow mirth,
How willingly we turn us then
Away from this cold earth,
And look into thy azure breast,
For seats of innocence and rest!"

All the poetry that Bryant wrote went as a matter of course as grist to the mill of the *Review*,[1] and he wrote a great deal of prose besides, — reviews, essays, and even narratives and descriptions. But, though he worked diligently, the *Review* did not meet with success. In March, 1826, it was merged with another periodical into *The New York Literary Gazette, or American Athenæum*, and a little later it combined with Parsons's old paper, *The United States Literary Gazette*, to form *The United States Review and Literary Gazette*. The change resulted in a considerable diminution of salary for Bryant, but he continued his connection with the new periodical until, in 1827, there being apparently no other magazine for a further amalgamation, it finally collapsed.

[1] With the exception of a few, *The Greek Partisan*, *The Gladness of Nature*, *Midsummer*, *The Two Graves* and *The Conjunction of Jupiter and Venus*, that round out his contributions to *The United States Literary Gazette*, and *A Summer Ramble*, that appeared in *The New York Mirror*. In his own magazine, in addition to the poems I have mentioned, he published *The New Moon* and some of his earlier pieces, *Hymn to Death*, *The Indian Girl's Lament* and "*I cannot forget with what Fervid Devotion.*"

CHAPTER VIII

THE *EVENING POST*

BRYANT was greatly depressed by the condition of his affairs during the early part of the year 1826, and his feelings found expression in that little poem of peculiar sombreness, *The Journey of Life*, in which he speaks of himself as surrounded by

> "dim uncertain shapes that cheat the sight,
> And pitfalls lurk in shade along the ground.
>
> "The trampled earth returns a sound of fear—
> A hollow sound as if I walked on tombs;
> And lights, that tell of cheerful homes, appear
> Far off, and die like hope amid the glooms.
> A mournful wind across the landscape flies,
> And the wide atmosphere is full of sighs."

When, however, his fortunes seemed at their worst, and he had even renewed his license to practise law in the New York courts, an opening came to him that put an entirely new complexion upon his circumstances. A vacancy having occurred on the staff of *The New York Evening Post*, Bryant was asked to accept the place temporarily, pending the decision of his friend Dana, to whom the position had been offered. Dana, after some hesitation, decided to remain in Boston, and Bryant became permanently employed as assistant to Mr. Coleman, the editor and leading proprietor of the paper.

The opening was an excellent one, for, while the occupation was less literary than the editing of a magazine, it promised to be vastly more secure and remunerative. The *Evening Post* was one of the oldest and most prosperous papers of the city. It had been founded in 1801 by Alexander Hamilton and his associates as a party organ, and it had continued to reflect their Federalistic opinions so long as Federalism remained a living issue. Its career, however, had curiously resembled that of the man who, now entering its service in a subordinate capacity, was for fifty years to direct its policy and to put upon it the stamp of his own individuality. As economical questions had arisen to replace the old governmental issues, and matters of foreign policy, the *Post*, almost alone among northern papers, became the advocate of the principle of free trade. Thus Bryant's affiliation with the paper was not merely fortuitous. It was the result of circumstances, no doubt, but it was strengthened by a real sympathy of principle and purpose that enabled him from the start, even under the direction of a superior, to render effective service.

Bryant's feeling about his new occupation will be seen in the following extract from a letter to Dana in 1828: —

"I am a small proprietor in the establishment, and am a gainer by the arrangement. It will afford me a comfortable livelihood after I have paid for the *eighth part*, which is the amount of my share. I do not like politics any better than you do; but they get only my mornings, and you know politics and a bellyful are better than poetry and starvation."

Since only his mornings were occupied with the affairs of the paper, it will be seen that he still had

abundant time to devote to the more congenial work of writing. For a time, *The United States Review*[1] claimed the balance of his attention; but after its collapse he was free to embark in another undertaking with his friends Sands and Verplanck. This was *The Talisman*, an annual such as was then in vogue both in England and America. It was a miscellany of prose and verse, embellished with steel engravings, and it had sufficient success to enable it to continue for the three years, 1828, 1829, and 1830. The contributions were all anonymous, the writers merging their several identities in an imaginary creation, Francis Herbert, about whom there was woven a slight veil of fiction that gave a certain unity to the publication. Bryant's own contributions, both in prose and verse, were numerous, and though some of his verses seem now as antiquated as the fashion of the publication which they adorned, others, if not among his best, are not unworthy of him, while one, at least, *The Evening Wind*, would deserve a high place in any selection. As it has been said, this poem seems less a description than the very thing itself which it describes. Bryant's art at its highest is unsurpassed in this quality of what Poe calls the "imaginative-natural." The feeling, however, is so direct and pervasive that it seems less the result of art than of nature. Its means are so subtile as almost to defy analysis. But such a stanza as that which follows will, in spite of the identical rhyme in "boughs" and "bows," well repay the examination of any careful student of the architectonics of verse-writing: —

[1] In this magazine appeared *The African Chieftain*, *October*, *The Damsel of Peru*, *Spring in Town* and *The Disinterred Warrior*.

"Go, rock the little wood-bird in his nest,
Curl the still waters, bright with stars, and rouse
The wide old wood from his majestic rest,
Summoning from the innumerable boughs
The strange, deep harmonies that haunt his breast;
Pleasant shall be thy way where meekly bows
The shutting flower, and darkling waters pass,
And where the o'ershadowing branches sweep the grass."

A poem to place side by side with this, for the purpose of comparing Bryant's two most characteristic modes of expression, is *The Past*, which the poet himself thought the best he had written up to that time. His friends also admired it particularly, and Sands, quoting the lines,

"Far in thy realm withdrawn,
Old Empires sit in sullenness and gloom,"

declared it to be greater than Gray's *Elegy*. It is an excellent specimen of Bryant's serious and meditative vein, but it is inferior, we think, to a poem like *The Evening Wind*, with its exquisite imaginative interpretation of nature.

There are other poems that are interesting. *A Scene on the Banks of the Hudson* is descriptive of the scenes amid which *The Talisman* was edited — for Sands lived in Hoboken, and his house was oftenest chosen for the meeting-place of the collaborators, who made it the starting-point for rambles along the high Jersey shore. It has charming lines like: —

"River! in this still hour thou hast
Too much of heaven on earth to last."

But it descends, too, to the lowest level of Bryant's commonplace, reached only too frequently at this period: —

"Loveliest of lovely things are they,
On earth, that soonest pass away.
The rose that lives its little hour
Is prized beyond the sculptured flower."

The titles of the remaining poems sufficiently indicate the character and the range of subjects with which they deal: *The Hurricane*, *William Tell*, "*Upon the Mountain's Distant Head*," *The Lament of Romero*, a translation from the Spanish, *The Greek Boy*, *The Hunter's Serenade*, "*Innocent Child and Snow-white Flower*," "*When the Firmament Quivers*" and *To the River Arve*, this last being an imaginary description supposed to be written at a hamlet near the foot of Mt. Blanc. There is also a fine sonnet, *To Cole, the Painter, departing for Europe*, which suggests the bond of union that existed between Bryant and the painters of his day, the representatives of the earlier school of American landscape painting, — men, like himself, who had newly discovered and were seeking to adapt to the demands of their country for a national art, the superb but neglected beauties and wonders of their native land. In 1826 Bryant had been made a professor in the new National Academy of the Arts of Design and had delivered to the classes five lectures on "Mythology," which he repeated for several years. He was thus brought into contact with such men as Dunlap, the artist, dramatic writer and biographer of Brockden Brown, and S. F. B. Morse, then an unknown painter, but later the immortal inventor of the telegraph. With them he helped to found the Sketch Club, a little society of artists and of those, like himself, who were interested in art, out of which later grew the famous Century Association,

of which Bryant was for more than one term president, holding that office at the time of his death.

Bryant was also invited to deliver a series of lectures on "Poetry," before the Athenæum Society, and these various public engagements contributed to raise his reputation in the city and to make him known beyond the circle of his immediate personal acquaintance.

But politics now came more and more to occupy the leading place in Bryant's attention. In 1827 the *Post* came out in support of Andrew Jackson, the Democratic candidate for President, and Bryant, who not only saw in him a foe to the system of a high protective tariff, but admired the sturdy old war-horse for the simplicity of his nature and integrity of his character, did all in his power to help the paper in its campaign. He even wrote an ode for the anniversary of the battle of New Orleans, which was read with great success at a political dinner in Washington by Verplanck, then a Representative, who acted as a sort of special correspondent for the *Post* and enabled it to win many "beats" over the adversaries.

All this, however, was merely preliminary to the more serious work that was to follow. In July, 1829, Coleman died, and Bryant became editor-in-chief of the *Post*. The whole conduct of the paper now devolved upon his shoulders, and he was required to shape its policy with reference to the great and absorbing questions that arose early in Jackson's administration, to claim public attention, to complete the readjustment of national parties, and to throw the whole country into such a political turmoil as it had not known since the days preceding the second war with Great Britain. These questions were mainly two, the

tariff and the National Bank, though a third, abolition, and the discussion of slavery generally in all its relations to the commonwealth, was soon to arise and, by degrees, to take precedence over both the others. To follow them step by step and to trace in detail the record of Bryant's long and varied political service, is impossible in the brief space allotted to this Life, and would, besides, be out of place in a narrative that is meant to deal mainly with the poet and man of letters. But to ignore them altogether is equally impossible. From the time, in 1829, of his assumption of the reins of government on the *Post*, his career ceases to be distinctively literary and becomes predominantly political and journalistic. He had come to New York in the hope of making his living by his pen in the pursuit of literature. He ended by yielding to the force of circumstances and by determining to make the best use of his powers by employing them in that profession through which they could be turned to some practical account. With his gift for writing he had also a natural bent for politics. This we have already seen in those early periods of political activity when, a mere child, he had attacked Jefferson in *The Embargo*, and later when, at Bridgewater, he had espoused the cause of the Massachusetts Federalists during the War of 1812. While therefore it was, no doubt, with deep regret that he found himself forced by the exigencies of making his living from the path he had originally chosen in giving up the profession of the law for which he had been educated, it was with no small degree of enjoyment in the work itself, that he now began to devote himself to the task of directing public sentiment through the columns of his paper. He felt,

moreover, a certain fitness for this vocation. In the law he had always been hampered by his weakness as an advocate. With his pen, however, he was thoroughly at his ease, and he had at his command a prose that was as vigorous as his poetry was polished.

Journalism, when Bryant assumed control of the *Post*, was still in its infancy, but its ideals were already changing, and in no way is the transition from the old to the new more sharply marked than in the contrast between Coleman and his successor. Coleman was a representative of the old school of journalism, and inherited the spirit of the age when a newspaper was the organ, not of public opinion, but of a political party. To-day the papers still represent different shades of political thought, and in their editorial columns seek to influence the minds of their readers. This, however, is secondary to what is regarded as the main function of the public press, namely, the publishing of the news. When the *Post* was established, however, the situation was just the reverse. Coleman was a lawyer. He was a partner of Aaron Burr, but a friend of Hamilton, and he accepted the position of the editor of the paper to further the interests of that statesman and to render effective service to Federalism. This, and not the gathering of the news, was his object. Like others of his time, he edited his paper with his sword as well as with his pen, for he fought many duels as the result of quarrels in which he became involved through his attacks on his political adversaries in the columns of the *Post*.

Bryant, on the other hand, may be called one of the fathers of modern professional journalism. Although a party man and believing in the political system of

the United States as the best means of securing the full advantages of our republican form of government, he did not regard the newspaper as first and foremost a party instrument. He believed, it is true, that only by affiliation with a great party could a paper gain any wide hearing or come to exert any considerable determining influence on public affairs. But he never let nominal affiliation interfere with what he conceived to be the chief function of a newspaper, namely, free and independent expression on all matters in which public interests were involved, even though his opinions came into conflict with the avowed policies of the party. His first duty was to the people. This was Bryant's conception of his own duty, and it marked, as we have said, a complete revolution in journalistic ideals. To put it into practice, he never hesitated to sacrifice either himself or his paper, and the record of the *Post* during the stormy days of the United States Bank and of abolitionism is a monument to his courage and high-mindedness. His attitude on these questions was often opposed to the views, not only of those of the opposite party, but of many of his own as well. The result was for many years grave financial loss from depleted subscription lists and advertising columns. But although he would often gladly have withdrawn entirely if circumstances had permitted, Bryant never wavered, and in the end he reaped a measure of reward not incommensurate with the value of his public services.

For Bryant had the good fortune to see most of the causes for which he had laboured, triumphant, and to feel that he had helped to bring about their success. Free trade, it is true, he never saw fairly established;

but he saw the National Bank and the state banks destroyed and the credit of the country, after the great panic of 1837, restored on its present sound basis. He also saw slavery abolished. Not that he was one of those who did most to bring about this great reform from the beginning. His work during the whole long agitation that led up to the Civil War was rather to uphold the Constitution, and to see justice maintained and the rights of citizens respected. He was not an abolitionist, for the fiery fanaticism of the abolitionists was repugnant to his own cold, calm, judicial temperament. Nor, in spite of his own early traditions, did he share in the disunion sentiments of the extreme Garrisonians. He abhorred slavery, but trusted rather to the action of time and of economic laws to bring about its uprooting in the South. What he fought for was the right of the abolitionists to present their petitions, to print their papers, and to make their speeches. He opposed the annexation of Texas, in which he saw a plan on the part of the South to extend and perpetuate slavery. And later, when civil war arose in Kansas, he sided with the Free-soilers, whom he regarded as the victims of a persecution. Bryant may thus be regarded as a wise and high-minded statesman who represented a middle course between the spirit of compromise and opportunism of Clay, Seward and Everett and the extreme partisanship of the abolitionists, while he was without any trace of that personal ambition that vitiated the high purpose of Webster and brought him at last under suspicion of having betrayed the cause that had been intrusted to him, in the hope of receiving the presidency.

And yet one feels that if he had caught a little of that noble, moral enthusiasm that animated a poet like Whittier, an orator like Wendell Phillips, or a statesman like Sumner, he would have come down to posterity as a more interesting and inspiring figure, as well as a better poet. Whatever we may think of abolitionism with respect to its specific measures, it was, it must be admitted, in the main, the most ideal impulse that has ever been felt in American politics. Whittier sacrificed his art to become the poet of a movement. Bryant kept outside of movements and preserved his art intact, yet with a certain loss in wide human sympathy. It is significant how little his poetry reflects of the excitement of the time in which it was written. Sometimes there is a heightening of its melancholy tone, owing to the weight of his cares and anxieties, and occasionally there is a direct reference to the strife in which he is engaged. But there is never anything in it to indicate the precise nature of this strife or to explain his partisanship of any cause or measure. It is the purely personal expression of a man, and of a man for whom the world of ideal action, if not of ideal aspiration, lay without and somewhat to one side of his most profound spiritual being and weighed heavily upon it. The element of conscience and the persistence of the Puritan in its strict sense of duty forced him into action, but it could not force him to invade, with the purposes and needs of men, that inmost sanctuary of his soul which was fed so exclusively with the beauty of the external world.

It must be remembered, however, that Bryant was born too early and came to New York too soon to feel the full force of that spiritual awakening of New England

with which its later poets became associated. Wendell Phillips, in the last public address which he delivered, admonished the youths to whom he was speaking, to take as their mentor and guide, not Washington or Franklin or Hamilton or Jefferson, but Sir Harry Vane; and this because, while the former represented merely a practical and political wisdom and a patriotism the tendency of which is to become narrow and exclusive, the latter stood for an ideal love of liberty as the root, not only of political welfare, but of all virtue and nobleness of mind. To the generation, however, to which Bryant belonged, was addressed no such admonition. The fathers of our country were regarded as the natural teachers and leaders of the American youth, who grew up, therefore, with a view of life somewhat circumscribed by the range of ideas set forth in the Constitution. This range Bryant himself early enlarged by an extensive reading of the English economists. But the course of events in his life, as well as the natural limits of the growth of the human mind, did not permit him to progress with his age beyond that point. Free trade and freedom from governmental interference in affairs of finance and commerce were always the issues that were closest his heart — so close, in fact, that he was in constant danger of forgetting that they were not principles, but matters of policy. Hence he adhered to the Democratic party long after his sympathies had become alienated from it in many directions, because for him it remained historically the party of opposition to Whig measures for high protection, government-instituted monopolies, a national bank, and vast outlays in internal improvements. Thus, in 1844 he

CHAPTER IX

1832

With Bryant's accession to the editor-in-chiefship of the *Evening Post* comes to a close the first, and for us the most important, period of his life, the period, we may call it, of poetical aspiration as opposed to that life of political and editorial activity on which he was now entering. Henceforth we lose sight, save at rare intervals, of the figure of the poet, in the busy and careworn publicist and man of affairs. Poetry became to a large extent, from now on, rather a source of private and personal consolation than, as formerly, the expression of a determined literary ambition. In a measure his contribution to American literature was already accomplished. In the fifty years of life that remained to him he added to his work an amount about equal to what he had already written. But this was largely repetition. His later performance involves no new interests and manifests itself in no new forms of expression. Not that there was any falling off in quality as the years went on; for, in spite of Bryant's precocity and the early age at which he attained to full maturity in his powers of expression, his work is marked throughout its entire extent by an extraordinary evenness of characteristic excellence. But though he wrote several poems as good as *Thanatopsis*, the *Inscription*, *June* and *The*

Evening Wind, if not *The Waterfowl*, he wrote nothing better or indeed very different from any of these. Hence, though it will be necessary to follow the career of the poet through these later periods of productivity and to note the recurrence in individual poems of the qualities to which we have already directed attention, there will be found little to affect the general estimate that may already be formed of his genius.

A definite basis for such an estimate is afforded by the complete collection of his poems which Bryant brought together in 1831 and published the following year. This contained, besides the pieces the titles of which we have already enumerated, certain translations from the Spanish, French and Provençal, as well as the few poems he had composed since the discontinuance of *The Talisman*. These were a memorial poem for the New England Society on the landing of the Pilgrims, entitled *The Twenty-second of December*, *To the Fringed Gentian*, the *Hymn of the City* and the *Song of Marion's Men*, a popular and spirited ballad which has remained one of the finest poems of American patriotism. In all, the edition of 1832 contained some eighty-nine pieces — a slight result, it would seem, for twenty-one years' cultivation of poetry. But this little sheaf of verses, the product of a life led, not in the quiet and studious seclusion so favourable, even necessary, to the poetic spirit, but among all the distractions of an active professional career, was of untold significance for America. It represented the first permanent achievement of the race in the realm of poetry, in the realm, that is, of those higher creative activities in which the more spiritual side of the race's

life and character is reflected. It was, indeed, the first proof that there was this ideal imaginative side to the American national character, and that the people who had achieved their independence were worthy, in the highest sense, of a separate national existence. One poet, it may be said, does not prove the poetry of a people. But individual genius is never detached, never without its root in the deeper mental, emotional, and spiritual life of the race. Hence it was not merely the soul of one man that found expression in these poems: it was the soul of the nation itself.

Bryant's poetry is national poetry because it deals with what is national and local in a way that is natural and universal. It is primarily nature poetry and therefore limited in scope, for physical environment is but one element among the many that act upon the life of a race. Even as nature poetry it has its limitation, in that its treatment of nature is almost exclusively descriptive and reflective, and does not therefore take account of all the ways in which this physical environment is felt and reacted upon. But although the representation of the national spirit is limited in Bryant's poetry, it is no less genuine and profound. It bears witness to the awaking of an eager and intense delight in the very face of the country, that for a new generation of Americans, born after the storm and stress of the Revolutionary period, was no longer regarded merely as the land they happened to inhabit, but as the nation's precious inheritance from nature.

Hitherto in the American conception of nationality there had been a narrowness that was inimical to the production of any very profound poetry. The interests of the country had been exclusively political. The

Revolution had been not one of those popular uprisings familiar in European history, in defence of a land whose soil was the dearest possession of the race, but a mere assertion of certain political rights and privileges. Hence it was not unnatural that the poet should have found in politics almost his only source of inspiration. But although poetry and politics may spring from the same source in "the general heart of man," it by no means necessarily follows that either affords a sufficient basis for the other to build upon. On the contrary, politics in which poetry predominates is likely to prove shallow and Utopian, whereas poetry that finds its main inspiration in politics is almost equally certain to make merely a temporary appeal to the affections of the hour.

There are other elements in the poetic ideal of nationality besides the political. There is a love of country that is not merely pride in its institutions, but a fondness for its natural features, for the very soil itself; an interest in its past as embodied in all legends and traditions; and a belief in its moral and and spiritual destinies. For such nationality to begin to show itself, through the love of landscape in Bryant, through the love of the legendary past in Irving, Longfellow and Hawthorne, through the love of truth and humanity in Whittier and Emerson, there was needed a yet longer period of peace and of conscious national existence.

This cause was greatly advanced by a new movement that began to make itself felt, in the breaking up of the classical tradition under the influence of that romantic revival which had already changed the face of English and European literature. Nothing could

have been more opportune for American literature than the coincidence between this movement of romanticism, and its own early attempts to establish itself in permanent forms of national self-expression. Romanticism is the natural mood of the poetry of a young nation. Hence the romantic spirit afforded the very atmosphere in which could come to birth the poetic spirit of a race full of enthusiasm and ideals, and needing but some stimulus from without to force it back upon an appreciation of what was picturesque and poetic in its own immediate environment and inheritance.

At first, it is true, there was little but servile imitation of contemporary English poets to mark the introduction into American literature of romantic ideals. It was not what was romantic in their own lives and surroundings, but the commonplaces of romantic convention in the poetry of the day, that constituted the basis of imitation for the native writers of America. But the romanticism that was felt by inferior writers superficially, as the latest literary fashion, was felt by Bryant as a great light breaking in upon his already formed, yet still vague and indeterminate, ambition in the direction of poetry. The specific example of Wordsworth led him to regard with new eyes the rugged landscape of that wild and beautiful section of rural New England in which it had been his good fortune to pass the impressionable years of his boyhood and early youth. He perceived that, however the voice of nature may vary in its tones and harmonies, the language with which it addresses the heart is ever the same, and that there among his own rocky eminences and solemn primeval forests were the haunts

of the same eternal muse of poetry that had spoken to Wordsworth on the pastoral moors of Westmoreland.

Bryant has been called the American Wordsworth. But it is no mere imitation of the English poet that we find in his poems. Wordsworth's love of nature was no cult that Bryant needed to acquire or whose rites he had to learn to practise with laborious art. It was already deeply planted in his own heart and needed but the hint of expression to leap to his lips in a new creation. Reared in almost absolute seclusion from the world of men, and in a correspondingly close companionship with nature, he had been marked from birth by that mistress as her chosen poet. It was a method, not a manner, that he received from Wordsworth, or not even a method so much as a key which by one turn unlocked his own heart and put him into possession once and for all of his own inheritance. There is no trace of Wordsworth's England in Bryant's description of New England landscape, not a trace of the feeling or imagery of that poet. Everywhere there is a new world seen with new eyes, new beauty perceived with absolute freshness of spiritual apprehension. Everywhere the sentiment for nature is direct and immediate and creates its own rhythmical and imaginative expression, so that the best poems seem themselves things of nature, brought into being and moulded into form by those infinite and incalculable forces, both physical and spiritual, that in operation constitute environment. "Nature herself seems to take the pen from him, and with her own sheer force to write," says a recent English critic[1] of Bryant, expressing the

[1] Mr. Churton Collins, in the *North American Review*, *Poets and Poetry of America*, I, January, 1904.

same idea. It is because Bryant's poetry at its best produces this impression that it is in the highest degree natural and therefore national.

But there is another way in which the element of nationality makes itself felt in Bryant's poetry. Wordsworth helped him to find his inspiration in the intimate personal life of nature. He may also have confirmed in him a native bent toward meditation upon natural processes in their moral and religious bearing, and in their analogical illumination of the mysteries of human life and destiny. But, as we have seen, this meditative cast in Bryant was coloured and directed less by the teachings of the English poet than by the inherited predispositions of Puritanism. Now, although our national ideal is by no means exclusively Puritanical, and tends to grow less so with each decade, Puritanism has had a large share in the shaping of the national character. It has quickened our consciousness, given us a standard of conduct, and spread at least a sentiment of religion and morality over the whole surface of our civilization. In short, the spiritual forces that enter into our life as a people are largely the spiritual forces of Puritanism, which, when they find expression in our poetry, may therefore be regarded as constituting a distinctive trait of American nationality. Bryant is thus a national poet, not alone because he wrote naturally of New England flowers and scenery, but because there is that in his attitude towards nature which is characteristic of the spiritual moods of Puritanism.

Although he came at a time when the initial impulse of Puritanism had subsided and left only those petrifications of old forms of faith and old ways of life

from which Hawthorne revolted, Bryant is first and foremost the Puritan poet of America. In him is heard the late but authentic voice of a race which in its prime had produced in America no poet worthy of remembrance, and which only in the moment of its decadence and decrepitude gathered all of its spiritual energies in one final effort for self-expression. If he wrote of natural objects in much the manner of early nineteenth-century naturalism, it was with a preponderance of religious feeling that led him to find, in every element of beauty and order in the universe, visible evidence of the goodness and greatness of the God worshipped by his fathers. For him nature was ever a medium of moral and religious revelation. The waterfowl, making its way across the horizon, and the humble yellow violet, blossoming by the roadside, have each their lesson for his spirit. He meditates upon death as a fact of both personal and cosmical significance, and in its universality he sees the working of God's primal curse which even nature, though guiltless, has not escaped. It is this guiltlessness, as it were, of nature that underlies her charm for his spirit, and constitutes the chief factor in that healing power which, in common with other poets, he felt her able to exert over the troubled and disordered minds of men, by turning them to the contemplation of God and His works of perfect beauty. And if the sadness of mortality is aroused by reflection upon the transitoriness of these things, it is dispelled in turn by the spectacle of renewal in the spring of each recurring year.

Such moral seriousness might amount to nothing more than mere didacticism if it were not so sweetly and naturally expressive of a genuinely poetic spirit.

As it is, Bryant's moralizing bears little relation to the didacticism of certain phases of eighteenth-century English poetry or of Wordsworth. It does not rise from any conscious consideration of the proper method of art to elevate and exalt the soul. It is not an artistic prepossession. It is a spiritual trait inherited from ancestors wholly preoccupied with the problem of good and evil in the practical sphere, and it breathes as gently and easily through his verse as the evening wind or the sound of the rustling of the leaves of his great forests. Like his close and accurate observation of nature, it is raised to poetry by the profound imaginativeness of its expression.

Although a reflective poet, not in any sense is Bryant primarily a teacher, nor should his poetry be studied for any complete system of philosophy to be derived from it. When certain moral ideas or religious sentiments rise to the surface in the contemplation of objects of natural beauty, he renders them, it is true; but he renders them less for the abstract truth that is in them than as part of the mood induced in his own mind by his surroundings — part, almost, of nature herself, whom he is ever, as a poetic artist, seeking to subdue to plastic expression. For Bryant is first and foremost an artist, and even nature appeals to him, not as something absolute in herself, or as affording a pleasure without extension beyond the moment of immediate enjoyment, but as a source of suggestion for the creation of forms of a higher and more spiritual beauty.

It is in this conception of poetry as the creation of supernal beauty that Bryant comes into close relation with another American poet, Poe, who preached the

same doctrine and practised it in his own work. Unlike in so many respects, Poe and Bryant have this in common, that they make their appeal, not so much to the intellect or to the emotions, as to *taste*, that faculty which alone is capable of a response to the pure form of imaginative art, without reference to the character of its content. Each finds in a detached and impersonal cast of sentiment the emotional atmosphere most compatible with the disinterested aims of the highest poetry, and in the perfection of form, the most legitimate employment of the intellect in art. Poe has stated his theory of sentiment in poetry; and Bryant, in the introduction to his *Library of Poetry and Song*, gives what he regards as the fundamental quality of all great poetry: —

"To me it seems that one of the most important requirements for a great poet is a luminous style. The elements of poetry lie in natural objects, in the vicissitudes of human life, in the emotions of the human heart, and the relations of man to man. He who can present them in combinations and lights which at once affect the mind with a deep sense of their truth and beauty, is the poet for his own age and the ages that succeed it. It is no disparagement either to his skill or his power that he finds them near at hand; the nearer they lie to the common track of human intelligence, the more certain is he of the sympathy of his own generation, and of those which shall come after him. The metaphysician, the subtle thinker, the dealer in abstruse speculations, whatever his skill in verification, misapplies it when he perplexes himself with the attempt to express his ideas in poetic numbers."

This serves, in a measure, to explain Bryant's poetic detachment from the social and political passions of his own time; these were complicated and abstruse, and though he could deal vigorously with

them in his editorial person, for his art he found them irreducible to that crystalline simplicity which he regarded as essential to the life of poetry. He was not one of those who regard the terms "prose" and "poetry" as interchangeable, or the difference between them as a mere matter of metre and rhyme. There was a fundamental difference in the very material proper to each. Hence he wrote little occasional verse, and could no more have made a poem out of an editorial on free trade or local self-government than he could have made over into an editorial either *Thanatopsis* or *The Forest Hymn*. It is not that he could not or did not make his position clear on both of these subjects, but that the special method of presentation necessitated, through a process of subtle and elaborate argumentation, while adapted to prose, was not adaptable to poetry. This process we call logic. Poetry, too, has its logic, but it is the logic of form. Between the two there is an irreconcilable opposition, so that any attempt to combine them can result only in confusion and in the loss of intellectual clearness, or sentiment, or rhythmical beauty, or all three. Such at least would have been Bryant's argument, for it may still be held that for the highest form of poetic genius it is possible to combine the search for truth with the creation of beauty, and that what on the surface appears to be a universal axiom of art arises only, in the case of Bryant, from his own individual limitation. If such limitation exists, it lies, however, not in Bryant's demand for luminousness, but in the idea that this luminousness is not possible for the great poet in the more remote ranges of human experience as in the immediate, and that the logic of the mind in

all its special manifestations is not ultimately identical. What is certain, however, is that Bryant, so far as his own effort was concerned, made his art the criterion of poetic reality; and in this, at least, he showed himself an unerring artist, if not the greatest poet.

Just as Bryant limited himself to the expression of the simplest thoughts and feelings, so, in pursuit of a luminous style, did he select the simplest material means for their expression. His verse forms are the least complicated, and his diction the most restricted, of any poet of his age. Outside of his blank verse he found his favourite vehicle in simple stanzaic forms such as the regular iambic quatrain in octosyllabic verse, on which he worked many variations, and which indeed may be said to constitute the basis of most of his other forms. The most elaborate, perhaps, is the nine-line stanza which is employed in *June*, and which in its arrangement of rhymes carries with it an exquisite response to the mood of sentiment which the poem expresses. The choice of the proper metre for any given subject is something in which Bryant rarely failed. It is invariably for the more impressive themes, whether reflective or descriptive, that he employs the blank verse which he knew how to handle with a firm grasp and with a variety of pauses that made it an instrument both of elasticity and of power. In many of these poems there is, not passion precisely, but a kind of eloquence that is his single escape from the atmosphere of tender and pervasive sentiment in which he habitually dwelt. In these moods he passes from the descriptive and reflective vein into a strain of direct invocation, as if engaged in the ritual of a sublime worship of nature.

As for his diction, this is simple at times almost to the point of baldness; but most often its simplicity is felt rather as a support to the elevation and austerity of the mood in which he wrote. Even his occasional baldness has in it something that consorts well with the note of elemental grandeur which enters into his descriptions, and which was called for by the rugged character of his favourite landscape. While his vocabulary is limited, its limitation arises less from poverty than from a rigid selective sense which sought precision and accuracy rather than mere opulence of verbal expression. From this careful attention to the choice of words, as well as in his reliance on simple metrical forms, it is easy to see the influence of those standards of eighteenth-century taste on which his own style was founded. Yet this influence is felt rather in the purity of his diction than in any marked traces of conventionality. There is a certain stiffness at times and an employment of words and phrases that have passed out of modern poetical usage. But for the most part his vehicle is the natural idiom of the English tongue that was restored to poetry by Cowper and Wordsworth. As a result there is in his best poetry a preponderance of the Anglo-Saxon over the Latin elements of our language; and this is one of the sources of his vitality, one of the things that give his descriptions a vividness and his moral reflections a pithiness of expression, as in the line that has passed into common currency,

"Truth crushed to earth will rise again,"

that are among their most striking characteristics. For, while Bryant's expression is luminously trans-

parent, it is not colourless. The very precision with which he chooses his words, especially descriptive words of form, colour, and motion, and limits them to those that best render the desired effect, while it often detracts from the musical flow of his numbers, heightens the painter-like quality which makes a constant appeal through the eye. Indeed, the definiteness and vividness of Bryant's descriptions often result in a very close approximation to the peculiar effect of pictorial art. It is as if he were handling lines and colours, and not the mere symbols of these things, with the added advantage of being able to suggest that perpetual motion of wind-blown grass and moving shadows that must forever remain suspended in any vision of nature as rendered by the painter. Finally, Bryant has a high imaginative instinct in the selection and use of words as in themselves objects having intrinsic value apart from all ideas and associations. Alliteration may be either a great vice or a great virtue. With Bryant, since he employs it not as an ill-considered rhetorical ornamentation, but as a reënforcement of the general effect, it is most often the latter. It completes the circuit, as it were, and helps to vitalize the expression into something complete and organic.

It is, therefore, as a lover of nature, as a quiet and contemplative spirit, sombre at times, yet never without a gleam of religious hope irradiating the gloomy thought of death; as the poet of a gentle and pervasive sentiment that flows from him and takes possession of all things lovely and expressive in the external world; and above all, as a simple and unpretending, yet vigorous and imaginative, artist, capable

of realizing his moods and visions in forms of permanent and appealing beauty, — that Bryant appears in the first comprehensive expression of his genius. He does not make his appeal to any very wide range of human sympathies, or solicit lively personal interest in himself through the extreme moods of romantic self-expression. His poetry is in the best sense of the word impersonal; it is an embodiment of that element of beauty which hovers between earth and the sky and fills the sensitive soul with a kind of spiritual ardour akin to worship.

That the manifestation of a genius so rare, so elevated and so superior in many ways to the soil from which it sprang, should be completely appreciated, was not to be expected when Bryant published his volume. In writing to him, Dana speaks of "the miserable notices of your poems at home." But for all this, the volume received much favourable mention. Only one review condemned it utterly. In the *North American* it was pronounced "the best volume of American verse that has ever appeared." Longfellow in the same number praised the translations "as rivalling the originals in beauty." And in the next number the historian-to-be, Prescott, wrote, "He is placed by general consent at the head of our poetic literature."

This success of the poems at home made Bryant eager to have them published in England, that he might receive the verdict of the critics of that country. At the suggestion of Verplanck he sent a copy of the volume to Irving, who was then living abroad, and wrote him a courteous letter, soliciting his offices in securing an English publisher. The application, backed by a letter from Verplanck, was successful. Irving had

never met Bryant, but he had seen his work and had formed a favourable opinion of it. Moreover, it was characteristic of his kindness to wish to do all that lay in his power to assist a fellow-countryman to the success that he himself had achieved. He therefore cast about for a publisher, and after some trouble found one who was willing to assume the responsibility and the risk of bringing out the work of an unknown American poet.

Irving's kindness did not end here. Since "something was necessary," he wrote Bryant, "to call attention at this moment of literary languor and political excitement to a volume of poetry by an author almost unknown to the British public," he placed his own name as editor on the title-page, and dedicated the book to Samuel Rogers, commending its contents to that venerable poet and patron of poets in the following flattering terms: —

"The descriptive writings of Mr. Bryant are essentially American. They transport us into the depths of the primeval forest, to the shores of the lonely lake, the banks of the wild, nameless stream, or the brow of the rocky island, rising like a promontory from amid a wide ocean of foliage, while they shed around us the glories of a climate fierce in its extremes, but splendid in all its vicissitudes. His close observation of the phenomena of nature and the graphic felicity of his details prevent his descriptions from ever becoming general and commonplace, while he has the gift of shedding over them a pensive grace that blends them all into harmony, and of clothing them with moral associations that make them speak to the heart. Neither, I am convinced, will it be the least of his merits in your eyes that his writings are imbued with the independent spirit and buoyant aspirations incident to a youthful, a free and a rising country."

Neither Bryant nor Dana was overpleased with the tone of this epistle dedicatory, any more than with the selection of the dedicatee, who stood for all that was most false and fashionable in the poetic taste of the age. Both felt that Irving had laid too great a stress upon the native elements of Bryant's verse and that what he had written was therefore calculated to give a wrong impression of the intention, which was less to write distinctively American poetry, than poetry which should be natural and imaginative.

"The long talk about the want of description peculiar to our scenery and customs," wrote Dana, in commenting on an extended and for the most part extremely eulogistic review by John Wilson, "Christopher North," in *Blackwood's*, "was owing in a measure to Irving's sweeping remark. In the few things in which it has been your object to describe what is peculiar to our country, you have done it; but these do not justify Irving's unqualified assertion."

Bryant concurred in this view. But he was little disposed to criticise Irving, even to his closest friend, on this score or with respect to another matter about which he maintained a private difference of opinion with Irving as to the wisdom of the latter's course. In writing to Bryant, Irving had advised him of a change that he had deemed it judicious to make on his own responsibility in one of the poems, *The Song of Marion's Men*, lest in its original form it "might startle the pride of John Bull on your first introduction to him." This change consisted in the softening of the line,

"The British foeman trembles,"

in the first stanza, to

"The foeman trembles in his camp."

As Bryant wrote later to Irving, when the matter unfortunately led to discussion between them, he did not approve of this change and would not himself have given it his authorization. At the moment, however, he said nothing; any criticism of one who had been at such pains to serve him would have appeared ungracious. But several years later, in 1836, William Leggatt, who had been Bryant's assistant before he had left the *Post* to conduct a paper of his own, the *Plain Dealer*, in making a general charge against Irving of "pusillanimity," instanced the above alteration as an example of the truckling of that writer to the British public. Bryant knew nothing of this attack at the time. Irving, however, when he saw the article, not unnaturally took it to have been inspired by the poet, and, resenting the imputation, answered with much spirit in an open letter to a New York paper. Bryant was equally incensed at Irving's insinuation of his complicity, and also made a public defence. But Leggatt, hastening to assume all responsibility for the article in the *Plain Dealer* and to exonerate Bryant completely, satisfactory explanations and apologies were made and accepted on both sides, and the matter was dropped and forgotten. Not long after, Irving returned to America, and Bryant had his first meeting with his distinguished fellow-countryman. The relations between the two writers never became as close as those between Bryant and Cooper, but they were always friendly and cordial.

The reception of the poems in England was on the whole favourable. Bryant's name was by no means unfamiliar to the critics of that country at least, for as we have seen, as far back as 1822, he had been noticed

with commendation by *Blackwood's*, and had since been referred to in that magazine and elsewhere with varying degrees of praise and disparagement; for the attitude of the mother country in those days to writers of America was most whimsical and capricious. It was *Blackwood's* that was now most cordial in its reception of the new volume, and it was in the review of John Wilson to which we have already referred, that was expressed the most unqualified admiration as well as the justest and most discriminating criticism of the poems.

One other literary event of the year 1832 remains to be briefly noticed as rounding out another phase of Bryant's earlier literary activity. This is his collaboration with Miss Sedgwick, Sands, Leggatt and Paulding, in a volume of prose stories entitled *Tales of the Glauber Spa*. Bryant's essays in fiction are not to be taken as indicative of a serious ambition to succeed in the form of the short story. They were merely the result of his friendships and of his participation in the social side of the life of New York. From this point of view he held up his end sufficiently well for his own satisfaction and for his credit with his associates. He wrote well, and his descriptions, especially of scenery and of such natural disturbances as hurricanes and landslides, are often impressive. Perhaps the best specimen of his powers in this direction is his description of Cuba in a narrative entitled *A Story of Cuba*, which is rendered the more remarkable by his not at that time having visited the island. He had also a respectable gift for the delineation of character, particularly of eccentric character, and his attempts at comic characterization, although laborious and never

approaching the delicate humour of Irving, are, to say the least, never so utterly stupid and ponderous as those of Cooper. But he utterly lacked narrative ability. So that, while these stories of Bryant's have the finish and dexterity that we might expect from a trained writer and a distinguished poet, they are utterly without the vitality of fiction. They are chiefly interesting as showing the vitality of the man himself and the pleasure which he derived from the exercise of his imaginative powers in divers forms of literary expression. These were great. Every kind of composition interested and tempted him. This is not the impression one gains from his poetry, where the expression is limited and the range is small. But Bryant the poet and Bryant the man are two very different persons. The prose of his fiction, like his editorial prose, belongs to the latter. It may well be that, in Bryant's case, the man is of inferior interest to the poet; but it is interesting and necessary to know that the somewhat remote and coldly spiritual personality of the poet had its complement in the social being, in the man of the world, in the fun-loving and dryly humorous boon-companion of a little provincial Bohemia.

Bryant's contribution to *Tales of the Glauber Spa* were the last of their kind from his pen. The success of the volume was saddened by the death of the leading spirit of the little coterie, Sands, who had been the source of much of Bryant's own gayety and inspiration in the lighter feats of literary art. Between the two men there had existed a deep and true affection. Bryant's name was the last word on Sands's lips, and it was Bryant who wrote the memoir of Sands's life

that appeared in the *Knickerbocker Magazine*. Serious duties were now calling Bryant away from the pleasant half-leisure of the life that he had been leading. But no doubt in the too unrelieved seriousness of the following years there is felt the loss of a friend who could have irradiated sunshine through the gloom even of his darkest days.

CHAPTER X

AT HOME AND ABROAD (1833-1844)

It is now necessary to summarize briefly the literary and personal events of the next thirty years. During this period the chief landmarks are the new editions and new volumes of verse which Bryant continued to issue from time to time, and the visits which he made in different years to places of interest in his own country, to adjoining countries and to Europe and the East. Travel was one resource of which Bryant availed himself with unflagging interest. He did not need to go far afield to experience the full sense of freedom which it brought him. He was fond of little jaunts and excursions, often on foot, with or without some fellow-pedestrian of kindred tastes, to those localities within a few hundred miles of New York, the beauties of which he could enjoy in brief periods of relaxation; and there were few points within this radius, such as the Catskills, the Berkshires and the Lehigh Valley of eastern Pennsylvania, — to which last place he was attracted as much by the quaint character and customs of the descendants of the Moravian settlers, as by the loveliness of the country itself, — that he did not visit many times. These expeditions were directly productive of very little poetry. That is, there are few poems like the one on the *Catterskill Falls* that are descriptive of particular localities. But

Bryant's habit of observation was kept active, and his mind well stored with images that passed into his general treatment of nature. Many of his impressions and observations he recorded in letters, which are full of charming descriptive passages. One such letter, written in 1840 to his friend Dana, and dealing with two trips made during the summer of that year, may here be introduced as an example of his skill in this kind of writing, as well as for the interest of the scenes which it describes. Bryant was one of the "discoverers" of the Moravians, about whom much has since been written:—

"NEW YORK, *September* 12.—I have made two journeys into the country. Once I went to New Milford, in Connecticut, by steamboat and railroad, and then walked up along the Housatonic through Kent, Cornwall, Canaan, and Sheffield, to Great Barrington, fifty miles. Here I saw my two daughters, and then walked to Pittsfield, from which I wandered over to Hampshire County, to Worthington, where I studied law, and to Cummington, where all that is left of my father rests in a burying-ground, on the summit of one of the broad highlands of that region. Do you know how beautiful the Canaan Falls are? I never saw anything like them in New England. And yet I lived within eighteen miles of them for two years, without making them a visit. I always thought that they were mere rapids. Yet they are extraordinarily beautiful, the wild Housatonic pouring over the precipice in two broad irregular sheets of snowy whiteness, with a little island of trees and shrubs hanging from the brow of the rock between them. My next visit was with my wife to Bethlehem, a Moravian settlement in Pennsylvania, nearly ninety years old—a peaceful, industrious, orderly, comfortable little community. It is situated on the Lehigh, a rapid and most beautiful river, with an island in the midst, shaded with old oaks and elms and drooping birches whose twigs hang down to the water. This is the pleasure-ground, the place for their little assemblies, their birthday

commemorations, coffee-drinkings and musical parties — for music is a passion with these people. They announce a death with plaintive music from their church-tower; they accompany a corpse to the grave with music, and they hate the sound of a bell so much that they never allow their church-bell to strike more than a dozen times to call their population to worship."

Bryant also made several visits to Princeton, Illinois, where gradually all the members of his family, including his mother, reassembled. In these visits, as the years went on, he saw the region pass from a wilderness into a settled and civilized community, and the neighbouring city of Chicago grow from a squalid collection of huts on the marshes into a great city. The first of these visits he made in 1832, after the publication of the poems. The trip was a long and difficult one in those days, but it was full of interest, for it led the traveller, by primitive conveyances, across the Alleghanies, down the Ohio, up the Mississippi and across the prairies. One episode is worth recording:

"While alone in these 'gardens of the desert,'" writes Mr. Godwin, "he encountered a company of raw Illinois volunteers, who were going forward to take part in the Black Hawk Indian War. They were led by a tall, awkward, uncouth lad, whose appearance particularly attracted Mr. Bryant's attention, and whose conversation delighted him by its raciness and originality, garnished as it probably was by not a few rough frontier jokes. He learned, many years afterward, from a person who had been one of the troop, that this captain of theirs was named Abraham Lincoln."

The impression made on Bryant by this visit to the West may be seen from the following extract from a letter to Dana:—

"I have seen the great West," he writes, "where I ate corn bread and hominy, slept in log houses, with twenty men, women, and children in the same room. . . . At Jacksonville, where my two brothers live, I got on a horse and travelled about a hundred miles to the northward over the immense prairies, with scattered settlements on the edges of the groves. These prairies, of a soft, fertile garden soil, and a smooth, undulating surface, on which you may put a horse to full speed, covered with high, thinly growing grass, full of weeds and gaudy flowers, and destitute of bushes or trees, perpetually brought to my mind the idea of their having been once cultivated. They looked to me like the fields of a race which had passed away, whose enclosures and habitations had decayed, but on whose vast and rich plains, smoothed and levelled by tillage, the forest had not yet encroached."

This fancy we find worked out in *The Prairies*, a poem written amid the scenes which it describes and full of vivid and impressive pictures of those

> "Unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,
> For which the speech of England has no name —
> The Prairies."

Bryant's imagination busied itself with the prehistoric races of men that had lived and hunted on these vast plains, and that now sleep beneath the soil and in

> "the mighty mounds
> That overlook the rivers."

The subject was a happy one in its appeal to Bryant's inspiration on its most serious side, and the poem is one of the best in the vein of lofty moralizing on the changing forms of life against a background of nature in itself solemn and majestic, and suggestive

of an eternity of time through which these changes are slowly wrought. The romantic aspect of the same subject is expressed in *The Hunter of the Prairies*, which was also written in Illinois the same year.

The series of longer voyages began in 1833, with a visit to Canada. With his appetite thus whetted, and glad to escape the abolition riots that had broken out in New York and that had made the office of the *Post* a centre of disturbance, he set sail the same year, with his wife, for Europe. He visited France, Italy and Germany, seeing the principal cities in the three countries and making observations on the scenery and institutions. These he embodied in letters to his friends at home and to the *Post*. They were for the most part rather disparaging in tone. He found the condition of the people, both social and political, deplorable, and the accounts of Italian skies and mountains greatly exaggerated. Everything was subjected to a comparison, usually unfavourable, with what he had left behind in America, and a constant note of homesickness pervaded the more personal of his letters. Unlike Irving, Bryant was not of a temperament to invest foreign places with an atmosphere of romantic interest. He had the keen eye of the realist, which saw that the life of the peasant was hopelessly squalid, and that the Italian landscape had been marred, not improved, by the hand of man through long centuries.

"Thus far," he writes, "I have been far less struck with the beauty of Italian scenery than I expected. The forms of the mountains are more picturesque, their summits more peaked and their outline more varied than those of the mountains of our own country; and the buildings, of a mas-

sive and imposing architecture, or venerable from time, seated on the heights, add much to the general effect. But if the hand of man has done something to embellish the scenery, it has done more to deform it. . . . The simplicity of natural scenery, so far as can be done, is destroyed; there is no noble sweep of forest, no broad expanse of meadow or pasture-ground, no ancient and towering trees clustering with grateful shade round the country seats, no rows of natural shrubbery following the course of rivers through the valleys. The streams are often but the mere gravelly beds of torrents, dry during the summer, and kept in straight channels by means of stone walls and embankments; the slopes are broken up and disfigured by terraces, and the trees kept down by constant pruning and lopping, until somewhat more than midway up the Apennines, when the limit of cultivation is reached, and thence to the summits is a barren steep of rock without soil or herbage. The grander features of the landscape, however, are beyond the power of man to injure: the towering mountain summits, the bare walls and peaks of rock piercing the sky, which, with the deep, irregular valleys, betoken, more than anything I have seen in America, an upheaving and engulfing of the original crust of this world."

Such traits of elemental and chaotic grandeur made always a powerful appeal to Bryant's imagination. These vast upheavals symbolized for him the stormy history of the human race and awakened a vein of profound and gloomy reflection. The mood found expression in that sombre and powerful poem, *Earth*, which he wrote in 1834, at Pisa, and in which the following passage, describing the voices of the earth to which he listens, lying, at midnight, under a sky black with clouds, is perhaps more impressive than anything he had written since *Thanatopsis* :—

"A voice of many tones — sent up from streams,
That wander through the gloom, from woods unseen,

Swayed by the sweeping of the tides of air,
From rocky chasms where darkness dwells all day,
And hollows of the great invisible hills,
And sands that edge the ocean, stretching far
Into the night — a melancholy sound!"

This is a style of writing in which Bryant has never been excelled or perhaps even equalled. No poet has ever given so well as he an imaginative sense of immensity, and of the mystery of the infinite in nature.

The ideas that are expressed in *Earth* recur in *To the Apennines*, which, however, lacks the gloomy intensity of the other poem. These two pieces constitute the chief result, in a poetic sense, of Bryant's sojourn in Europe.

Of the remaining poems, *The Knight's Epitaph* is an attempt to reconstruct the character of the mediæval knight whose image was graven on the lid of a sepulchral vault in a church at Pisa. *The Child's Funeral* opens with a few stanzas descriptive of the Bay of Naples from Sorrento, and proceeds with the narrative of the incident referred to in the title. *The Strange Lady* is an experiment in handling the romantic legendary lore of Germany; and finally, *Life* is a reflective poem in which a reference to the Istar is the sole internal evidence of the place where it was written, Munich. These four poems constituted Bryant's entire output for the year 1835.[1]

Bryant was preparing to spend the second winter of his stay abroad at Heidelberg, where the society was

[1] Three other poems appeared in New York publications during Bryant's absence, *Seventy-six*, *The Living Lost* and *The Hunter's Vision*. Their precise date of composition is unknown, but they are included by Mr. Godwin among the poems of this period.

rendered the more agreeable by the arrival of Longfellow, when the news of the sickness of William Leggatt, his assistant, whom he had left in charge of the *Post*, rendered his immediate return to America imperative. He at once set out for home and reached Havre in February. A storm that drove his ship into Plymouth delayed his passage, but enabled him to see something of the coast towns in England. On reaching New York an unexpected honour attended him in the form of an invitation to a public dinner, signed, among others, by Irving, Halleck and Verplanck. This, however, he modestly declined on the score of having "done nothing to merit such a distinction."

But his real reason may have been worry over the condition of his affairs. He found Leggatt no better, and the *Post* in a bad way. "The *Evening Post* was a sad, dull thing during the winter," he wrote to his wife, whom he had left in Europe to continue her tour with Longfellow's family, "and people were getting tired of it. I have raised it a good deal, so that it begins to be talked about and quoted. It needed my attention very much. . . . I must now apply myself to bringing it up to its old standard, after which I shall look for a purchaser."

The project here alluded to of selling the *Post* seems now to have been very seriously entertained by Bryant. It formed part of a plan to retire altogether from newspaper work and to follow westward in the footsteps of his brothers, to the elder of whom, John, he wrote at large on the prospects in Illinois and the possibility of acquiring there a tract of land where he could set up as an agriculturist. It was not, however, a favourable moment to find a purchaser for the

Post property, which had greatly declined in value during his absence. It was necessary, for a while at least, to devote himself to restoring its prestige before he could hope to retire other than penniless. This task became more difficult than he had anticipated. Bryant succeeded in reviving the old editorial vigour of the *Post*, but he diminished rather than increased its popularity by the attitude of hostility which he adopted towards the system of state banks which had been adopted by Jackson in place of the United States Bank, which had become extinct by the expiration of its charter in 1836. Many subscriptions and advertisements were thus withdrawn by those who saw in Bryant an enemy to national prosperity and who, in 1837, when the crash came, attributed to him, in part, the blame for the great panic of that year.

These days were undoubtedly the darkest in Bryant's life. Through the country at large he was reprobated by both parties alike, and in New York he was subjected to a measure of social ostracism that was very galling to his pride.[1] Something of the bitterness engendered in Bryant by the strife in which every man's hand seemed turned against him is re-

[1] A story is told by Mr. Godwin that indicates how keenly he felt and resented this ostracism: "In 1842, when Charles Dickens was here, Mr. Bryant was invited by a prominent citizen to meet him at dinner, but declined. 'That man,' he said to me, 'has known me for years without asking me to his house, and I am not now going to be made a stool-pigeon to attract birds of passage that may be flying about.'" He met Dickens, however, on another occasion. The feeling against Bryant was intensified by his attitude toward the abolitionists. Respectability was still further outraged by his association with the Locofocos or Radical Democrats, who constituted the younger and more turbulent branch of the party in the city.

flected in one of the few poems that he wrote during this period: —

> "A friendless warfare! lingering long
> Through weary day and weary year,
> A wild and many-weaponed throng
> Hang on thy front and flank and rear."

Not, however, that we are to think of his life as being wholly without its brighter relief. He lived, it is true, in great seclusion; but it was a seclusion rendered endurable to a man of his quiet tastes, by his books, by his rambles in the country, by his family associations, and by intercourse with a small though select circle of friends. These included most of the distinguished men of letters and artists of the day who made their home in New York or who came from time to time to the city. Among them was Cooper, who seems always to have been greatly attached to Bryant, and who, when in town, was often seen at the office of the *Post*.

"The difference between the two men was very striking," writes Mr. Godwin, who had recently joined the staff of the *Post* and must therefore have seen them together many times, "and yet their intercourse was singularly courteous and agreeable. Cooper burly, brusque and boisterous, like a bluff sailor, always bringing a breeze of quarrel with him; Mr. Bryant shy, modest and delicate as a woman — they seemed little fitted for friendship. Yet Bryant admired not only the genius, but the thorough-paced honesty and sturdy independence of Cooper; and Cooper, while he admired the finer vein of the poet, was won by his fearless vindication of opinions with which he himself did not always agree. 'We others,' Cooper once said, 'get a little praise now and then, but Bryant is the author of America.'"

Other visitors were Audubon the naturalist; William Gilmore Simms, the South Carolina novelist, "a voluble talker, who claimed to set us right on the Southern question"; John L. Stephens, the traveller, and author of a book on his adventures in Arabia Petræa, which was reviewed by Poe; and Poe himself, who came "once or twice, to utter nothing, but to look his reverence out of wonderful lustrous eyes."

We may speak here, too, of the companionship that Bryant found in his wife. It has been said that she was the only intimate friend that he ever had, and certainly in the poem entitled *The Future Life*, written in 1839, at the time when the value of all deep personal ties must have been keenly felt, there is expressed a measure of dependence on her very presence calculated to create the impression that husband and wife were very closely united: —

> "For I shall feel the sting of ceaseless pain
> If then I meet thy gentle presence not;
> Nor hear the voice I love, nor read again
> In thy serenest eyes the tender thought."

Of Bryant, the man, at this period, Mr. Godwin has given us an impression in the following record of their first meeting: —

"A briefless barrister in the great city, I had been led to a modest boarding-house at No. 316 Fourth Street, where for some time I was almost the only inmate. But one evening, on entering the common room, the owner, a native of Great Barrington, introduced me to a gentleman, whose name I did not hear, as about to become a member of our small and select family. He was of middle age and medium height, spare in figure, with a clean-shaven face, unusually large head, bright eyes, and a wearied, severe, almost satur-

nine expression of countenance. One, however, remarked at once the exceeding gentleness of his manner, and a rare sweetness in the tone of his voice, as well as an extraordinary purity in his selection and pronunciation of English. His conversation was easy, but not fluent, and he had a habit of looking the person he addressed so directly in the eyes that it was not a little embarrassing at first. A certain air of abstraction in his face made you set him down as a scholar whose thoughts were wandering away to his books; and yet the deep lines about the mouth told of a struggle either with himself or with the world. No one would have supposed that there was any fun in him, but, when a lively turn was given to some remark, the upper part of his face, particularly the eyes, gleamed with a singular radiance, and a short, quiet, staccato, but hearty laugh acknowledged the humorous perception. It was scarcely acknowledged, however, before the face settled down again into its habitual sternness. Of public affairs this gentleman spoke with great decision — as one who thoroughly comprehended them, and had no fear of the ultimate issues. I was not told, until he had gone, that this was Mr. Bryant, the poet and journalist."

Shortly after this meeting Bryant invited Mr. Godwin to become his assistant on the *Post*, so that the latter had an opportunity to observe the poet in his editorial sanctum: —

"Unfortunately, the *Evening Post* was not in a position to pay for varied or effective services; and the editorial department was reduced to three persons. Mr. Bryant wrote the leading articles and reviews of books; his first assistant took in hand the exchanges and the theatres; and the third person acted as a general reporter, with occasional aid from other reporters, while ship news was gathered by pilots in the common employ of the several evening journals. As the staff was so small, the labour was very severe; but it fell upon Mr. Bryant, who had taught his public to expect every

day some disquisition worthy to be read. . . . Our hours were from seven o'clock A.M. to about four P.M., and promptly every morning Mr. Bryant was at his desk, working without intermission till the paper had gone to press. He was then very impatient of interruption, even irascible at times, but uniformly courteous toward his colleagues and the printers. His articles, always prepared in the office, were written, like Pope's *Homer*, on the first scrap of paper that came to hand — the backs of old letters, or the reverse side of former articles. Writing slowly and carefully, with many erasures and corrections, but in a neat and graceful script, his proofs required very little rectification. Often the foreman of the printing-room would stand over him, snipping off line by line as he wrote, in order to be in time for the 'make-up.'

"Commonly he began his disquisition, whatever it might be, with an anecdote or story illustrative of the theme, which caused a witty opponent whom he had castigated to say that the *Evening Post* always opened with a stale joke and closed with a fresh lie. His ready memory of the poets and essayists helped him to apt quotations wherewith to enliven or enforce his argument. He seldom surpassed a half-column of print in getting his thought well out, . . . seldom indulging in the discussion of general principles, but taking up the particular aspects of each question. . . . Delicate irony or ridicule was his favourite weapon; but, when the occasion served, he could be excessively sharp and stinging."

Yet Bryant's editorial ardour was kept in restraint by a native courtesy and a high standard of conduct. It is recorded, however, that once, under extreme provocation, he actually came to blows with an opponent who had maintained an offensive attitude toward him in public. The next morning he apologized for the occurrence in the *Post*. Another time he was challenged to fight a duel. But Bryant, who did

not believe in the practice and who would not have fought under any circumstances, deftly turned the challenge aside. Times had changed since the elder day of journalism represented by Coleman.

It may seem strange that, involved as he was in incessant political conflict, Bryant should have had any time for literary pursuits. He made it a habit, however, to drop his daily cares the moment he left the office. Hence he got time to read more or less and to keep abreast of current literature. He wrote to Dana: "I see the outside of almost every book that is published, but I read little that is new." Everything was "new" in the literature of the day in America. *Newness* was the name given to the movement that had sprung up in New England and that found its chief exponent in Emerson. Bryant had little interest in the transcendental metaphysics of this writer, whom he admired, nevertheless, as a poet and essayist. His attention to the progress of literature in the country continued. He early singled out Hawthorne and paid tribute to his powers, while he recognized in Prescott the first great manifestation of the historic spirit in America. Finally, he was instrumental in getting published that classic account of sea-going experiences, *Two Years before the Mast*, the work of Richard Dana, Jr., the son of his old friend.

Bryant even found the time and the inclination to write an occasional poem, though his output during this period was meagre. In 1836 he composed "*Earth's Children cleave to Earth*," *The Green Mountain Boys*, *Catterskill Falls* and *A Presentiment*; in 1837, *The Battle-field*, from which we quoted a stanza; and in 1838, *The Death of Schiller*. Of these, *A Presentiment* and

The Death of Schiller are of interest as bearing witness to another occupation to which Bryant devoted his leisure, the study of German and the reading of the classic literature of that language.

The years 1839 and 1840, however, ushered in a revival of poetic activity. During those years he wrote *The Future Life*, *The Fountain*, *The Woods*, *In Memory of William Leggatt*, *The Old Man's Counsel* and *An Evening Revery*. And from 1841 to 1844 he wrote nine poems, whose titles are: *The Painted Cup*, *The Antiquity of Freedom*, *The Maiden's Sorrow*, *A Hymn of the Sea*, *The Return of Youth*, *Now*, *The Crowded Streets*, *The White-footed Doe* and *The Waning Moon*.

In both 1842 and 1844 Bryant issued new volumes of verse, *The Fountain, and Other Poems*, and *The White-footed Doe, and Other Poems*, respectively. Previous to these dates, he had, in 1835, 1836 and 1839, published new editions of the collection of 1832, to which in each instance new material had been added. But these two volumes were the first independent publications he had made since that earlier collection had originally appeared. *The Fountain, and Other Poems* contained some fourteen pieces, all of which had been written during the last five or six years. The record contained an even smaller number, ten, which with a single exception had been written since the publication of the collection of 1842. This exception was *A Summer Ramble*, which, though it dated back to 1826, had never been included in any collection of Bryant's works.

In the preface to *The Fountain, and Other Poems*, Bryant makes a remark which shows that he had not

been inattentive to Dana's counsel, so often renewed, to write a longer and more important poem than any he had yet undertaken. Some of the poems he presented "merely as parts of a longer one planned by the author, which may possibly be finished hereafter." Precisely what this plan was, is not known, for the longer poem was never completed. No doubt he had in mind a reflective and descriptive work somewhat in the manner of Wordsworth's *Excursion* and Cowper's *Task*. One feels, however, that the sombre elevation that makes such as *The Fountain*, *An Old Man's Counsel*, *The Evening Revery* and *The Antiquity of Freedom* so impressive within short compass, would have become intolerable in a longer production. Evidently Dana perceived this, for he wrote to Bryant, after reading *The Return of Youth* and *Noon*, poems belonging to the same series: "Have you a poem with some few passages of more stir and passion (I don't mean, of convulsion) than these? If your poem is long, it will need to have here and there a peak thrown up out of the level."

But stir and passion were foreign to Bryant's verse at any period; and as he himself probably perceived that his art was not sufficiently flexible to encompass the range and variety of effect which are essential to a long poem, he abandoned the project. The conception, however, had not been unproductive. It had afforded him an incentive to write, at a time when such an incentive was greatly needed, and a large number of pieces in both *The Fountain* and *The White-footed Doe* were the result of the effort to carry it into execution.

CHAPTER XI

AT HOME AND ABROAD (1844-1855)

THIS renewal of literary activity marks the relaxing in a measure of the strain under which Bryant had been labouring. As the financial crisis passed, and Van Buren's administration gave way to that of Harrison and Tyler, political excitement subsided, and Bryant was no longer the subject of such determined attacks as he had previously sustained. Moreover, with respect to the South and to slavery, there had been growing up in the Northern states a new body of public opinion, which found in Bryant its spokesman. Impatience began to be felt at the dictatorial attitude of the slaveholders in their attempt to control the policy of the government in their own interests. The *Post* therefore gained gradually in circulation and favour, and became for the first time in many years a paying property.

The first effect of this renewed prosperity is felt in the purchase by Bryant, in 1843, of a piece of land at Roslyn, on the north shore of Long Island. It had always been his ambition to possess a country home in the neighbourhood of New York. "At last," he writes to Dana, "I have house and lands on Long Island — a little place in a most healthful neighbourhood, just above sea-water — a long inlet of the Sound overlooked by woody hills, and near a village skirting

several clear sheets of fresh water, fed by abundant springs which gush from the earth at the head of the valley." Here henceforth in this retreat Bryant passed the greater part of each year. Here he planted his trees, cared for his garden, entertained his friends, and, later, when he had reached the summit of his reputation, received his guests — famous men from all parts of the world who made of Roslyn a place of pilgrimage. Bryant came to possess more than one house, but it is "Cedarmere" that we associate most closely with the name of the poet.[1] In every detail it was a perfect reflection of his personality. The grounds, some forty acres in extent, were carefully cultivated, and the most was made of every natural scenic effect. The house, an old one, having been built in 1777, was comfortable and unpretentious. It became filled in time with those mementoes of friendship and admiration which make the home of a poet a kind of shrine hung with votive offerings. It is amid such surroundings that we have the most distinct impression of Bryant during the latter half of his life, a period when peace, plenty and contentment in large measure rewarded the unremitting toil of his earlier years.

It was no complete retirement, however, that Bryant contemplated in making his purchase. He was still as active as ever and as full of interest in the world. In the spring of 1843, before the bargain was completed, he went South on the invitation of his friend Simms, the novelist, and made an extensive tour, enjoying the unfamiliar look of the country, and making a study of the institution of slavery at first hand.

[1] In 1902 the house was burned to the ground.

In 1845 he made his second voyage to Europe. This time he went directly to England, where he saw the principal sights of town and country, including a considerable amount of literary society at London, where he was hospitably received by Samuel Rogers, and met Moore, Milne, Joanna Baillie, the Hewitts, Leigh Hunt, Crabbe Robinson and others. The glory had, however, in a considerable degree departed from English literature at this time. Of the great writers of the preceding age only Wordsworth and Landor were left. The latter Bryant did not meet till many years afterward at Florence. To the former, Bryant paid a special visit at Rydal Mount, but according to Mr. Godwin he was less impressed by the man than by his poetry. In Edinburgh Bryant tried to see Wilson, but that critic, to whom he owed so large a debt of gratitude, was absent from the city.

From England Bryant crossed over to the Continent, where he passed the summer and autumn months travelling through France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Austria, Italy and Switzerland. The thread of interest running through all these rambles is Bryant's preoccupation with matters of art. Not only did he visit assiduously all the collections and exhibitions of paintings and statuary to which he could gain access, but he was fond of frequenting studios and the society of artists. This was the age when American youth had begun to go abroad to study art at the great centres and under the recognized masters. Everywhere Bryant found fellow-countrymen, some of whom were already old acquaintances, busy in foreign studios with brush and chisel. In London he had seen Powers's *Greek Slave*, and was proud as an

American of the success that had been achieved by this early masterpiece. In Düsseldorf he met Hunt, whom he characterizes as "a young man of promise, devoting himself with great energy and earnestness to his art." And at Florence he saw Horatio Greenough, whose group, *The Indian and the Hunter*, could not fail to awaken sympathy in the poet who had written *The Indian at the Burial Place of his Fathers*.

Bryant returned to America in November, 1845, and in 1846 he prepared for the press a new illustrated edition of his poems. Only two new pieces, *The Waning Moon* and *The Stream of Life*, were added, but the whole body of his work was subjected to a rigid scrutiny by himself and by Dana, who suggested many textual emendations, but would not permit his friend to follow his inclination in omitting certain poems altogether. It is evident that Bryant regarded this edition as definitive, and as of peculiar importance to his reputation as a poet. Already he was beginning to suffer from the rivalry of younger writers who represented the new ideals that were spreading in the literary world, and to which the public taste was becoming adjusted. New critics arose who were imbued with the romantic spirit in its more recently developed and extreme tendencies, and who were impatient with those survivals, which they found in Bryant's art, of the eighteenth-century spirit and manner. This new critical attitude toward Bryant had been clearly expressed by Griswold in his *Poets and Poetry of America*, which had appeared in 1843. Griswold wrote: "His genius is not versatile; he has related no history; he has not sung of the passion of love; he has not described artificial life. Still, his

tenderness and feeling in *The Death of the Flowers*, *Rizpah*, *The Indian Girl's Lament* and other pieces, show that he might have excelled in delineations of the gentler passions had he made them his study." In short, Bryant was narrowly a reflective and descriptive poet in an age that was coming to regard poetry as properly the vehicle for a varied and passionate representation of life, and to demand a greater degree of intellectuality as well as a richer and more elaborate art of expression. Among the poets and critics of the younger generation, Poe, almost alone, raised his voice in Bryant's defence: —

"It will never do to claim for Bryant a genius of the highest order," he wrote; "but there has been latterly, since the days of Mr. Longfellow and Mr. Lowell, a growing disposition to deny him genius in any respect. He is now commonly spoken of as 'a man of high poetical talent, very "correct," with a warm appreciation of the beauty of nature and great descriptive powers, but rather too much of the old-school manner of Cowper, Goldsmith and Young.' This is the truth, but not the whole truth. Mr. Bryant has genius, and that of a marked character; but it has been overlooked by modern schools because different in those externals which have become in a measure symbolical of those schools."

The new edition appeared in 1847. The same year occurred the death of Bryant's mother, a loss that later suggested the poem which begins, "The May sun sheds an amber light." For the present, however, he was silent, and no poem appeared from his pen for three years.[1] But in 1848 he delivered the first of that long series of memorial addresses which became

[1] In 1845 he had written *The Stream of Life* and *The Unknown Way*, and in 1846 *The Land of Dreams* and "*Oh, Mother of a Mighty Race.*"

henceforth one of his most characteristic forms of expression. The subject on this initial occasion was the artist, Thomas E. Cole. There was a peculiar fitness in the choice of Bryant for the performance of this rite, for not only had Bryant been on terms of intimacy with Cole, but the two men, in their respective arts, had stood for much that was common both in ideals and execution. What Bryant did for American landscape in poetry, Cole did for the same range of subjects in painting; and just as Bryant became the father of a native school of nature poets, so with Cole originated the American landscape school in which our art has reached its highest and most characteristic expression.

Early in 1849, after the collapse of the Free-soil movement, in which he had participated, Bryant left the *Post* in the hands of Mr. John Bigelow, then a new recruit to his forces, and later one of his biographers, and made a visit to Cuba. He saw the island with some thoroughness, making a special study of slavery and also taking evidence as to the sentiment of the different classes on the subject of annexation to the United States, which was then under discussion in both countries. On his return to New York, an old friend, C. M. Leupp, his companion on many rambles in the Catskills and other picturesque regions of his own land, proposed a joint trip to Europe. He fell in readily with the project, and early summer found them in London visiting galleries and exhibitions and meeting distinguished artists under the patronage of Samuel Rogers. A tour of England and Scotland for the sake of the scenery and spots of literary and historic association followed, and then the two travellers crossed to the Continent, which they found in a state

of revolutionary excitement. Another than Bryant might have found it peculiarly interesting to traverse Europe at that moment and witness the signs of popular upheaval and military despotism. But for him the plotting of Louis Napoleon and the sight of soldiers in every city he visited from Paris to Munich brought nothing but disgust and a keen renewal of that sentiment of revulsion from a civilization whose institutions were so little stable and for which liberty was but a name. He was glad to escape to the quiet confines of the Swiss republic, where he spent the remainder of the summer viewing the scenery.

As on previous visits to Europe, Bryant had on this occasion written the record of his travels in the form of letters to the *Post*, and on his return to America, at the instance of his friend Dana, and of the publisher, Mr. G. P. Putnam, he collected all the letters that he had written during his three trips to Europe, as well as during his minor excursions to Cuba and to the outlying sections of his own country, in a volume which was published in 1850 under the title of *Letters of a Traveller*. This is almost the only literary work of these years. In 1849 he had written "*The May Sun sheds an Amber Light*" and that charming piece entitled *The Planting of the Apple-Tree*, which affords a glimpse of Bryant in his rustic retirement at Roslyn, surrounded by children and engaged in one of those simple, rustic occupations that gave peculiar contentment to his mind and served to offset the perpetually harassing nature of his daily vocation on the *Post*. From 1847 to 1853 there is, however, a period of unbroken silence so far as the poet is concerned, although in 1851 he was called on to deliver

another memorial address before the New York Historical Society, — this time on the life and character of Cooper, who had died in the winter of the preceding year.

1852 saw Bryant again en route, this time toward the Orient. He first visited England, where he met a Miss Marian Evans, to whom he refers in his diary as "a blue-stocking lady named Ellans," and Herbert Spencer, whom he set down as "Mr. Spencer, a bookseller." A few years before he had been in Paris at the time of the election of Louis Napoleon to the presidency. He now arrived there on the eve of the proclamation of the Empire. From Paris he proceeded with a large party across France and Italy to Malta, where he embarked for Alexandria. His tour was the usual one through Egypt and Syria and back to Constantinople and Greece and the island of Corfu, whence he returned by Trieste to Venice and the Mediterranean, and back, by the way he had come, to Paris and London.

It was from this voyage that Bryant returned with that long beard, already white when it came, which is peculiarly associated with his physiognomy in his best-known portraits. To those who knew him, it made so great a change in his appearance that he was not readily recognizable. He derived a certain amusement from the effect upon his friends of this transformation, which he playfully completed upon occasion by donning a Turkish dress that he had brought back from the East. In one of his letters he tells how he appeared to his next-door neighbour at Roslyn, a Miss Hopkins, and stood talking to her for fifteen minutes in broken English, making her actually believe all that time that he was a Turk.

With 1853 commences another of those periods of comparative productivity which occur from time to time in his later life and which correspond to the intervals when the cares of politics bore less heavily upon him. In 1853 he wrote *The Burial of Love, The Conqueror's Grave* and *The Voice of Autumn;* in 1854, *The Snow-Shower* and *A Rain-Dream;* in 1855, *Robert of Lincoln* and *The Twenty-seventh of March.* In 1854 also appeared two new editions of his works in this country, one with and the other without illustrations, and at the same time a new edition was brought out in England.

In 1856 occurred the first campaign of the Republican party, whose ranks Bryant had joined and in whose conduct he was too engrossed for writing. In the spring of 1857, however, he sends forth from Roslyn his *Invitation to the Country,* and follows it with the charming *Wind and Stream.* In both these poems is felt a delight in nature that increases rather than diminishes as he grows older and becomes more and more enamoured of retirement as the solace of an active life. He was prepared, apparently, to spend this year, 1857, with particular relish at Roslyn, after the toil of the campaign. But it was not so destined. Mrs. Bryant's health had for some time been poor, and it was thought that a change would be beneficial to her. In May, therefore, they set sail for Europe. At first they travelled in Holland, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland; but as the summer was hot, they proceeded south and settled for a time at Bagnères-de-Luchon in the Pyrenees. From this point they entered Spain, where they spent some weeks at Madrid. It was a matter of regret to Bryant that

he could see no more of that country which had always been the elusive dream of his foreign travel. He writes to a friend: —

"I ought to have taken more time to see Spain, and should have done so but for my family, who had to make the visit to Italy before our return. So I missed Toledo, Cadiz, Seville and Cordova, and many other cities of Spain, as well as some entire provinces, with which I should be glad to have formed an acquaintance. After all," he adds with philosophy, "what is the use of trying to see everything? There will always remain some remarkable spot unvisited, and some curious neighbourhood unexplored. It is enough to see what we can conveniently, and to read about the rest. I am contented to have seen just a corner or two of Spain; for the rest of it, I shall refer to the guide-books and the travellers."

The Bryants arrived at Naples in January and were detained there four months by Mrs. Bryant's illness. Reading and writing occupied much of Bryant's time during this period of enforced idleness, and we have, as a result, a handful of poems in which, curiously but characteristically, his mind occupies itself, not so much with what lay beneath his eyes, as with the remembered scenes of his own country. Thus in *The River, by Night*, it is the Hudson that he celebrates, with only a passing classical reference to the Tiber. In one poem, *A Day-Dream*, there is a touch of Italian atmosphere. Naturally the circumstances that detained them so long coloured his thoughts. In *A Sick-Bed*, it is his wife who addresses him, and from her words we see that the seriousness of her illness was clear to them both. On her recovery he addresses her in the beautiful poem *The Life That Is*, in which, with an unwonted touch of deep personal feeling, he writes: —

"Twice wert thou given me; once in thy fair prime,
Fresh from the fields of youth, when first we met,
And all the blossoms of that hopeful time
Clustered and glowed where'er thy steps were set.

"And now, in thy ripe autumn, once again
Given back to fervent prayers and yearnings strong,
From the drear realm of sickness and of pain
Where we had watched, and feared, and trembled long."

Naples was also the scene of a singular event that casts some light upon Bryant's private and religious character. The occurrence may best be described in the words of Mr. Robert C. Waterston, a Unitarian minister and Bryant's close friend, who was present and officiated at the ceremony:—

"I received from him a note stating that there was a subject of interest upon which he would like to converse with me. . . . Anxiously watching, as he had been doing, in that twilight boundary between this world and another, over one more precious to him than life itself, the divine truths and promises had come home to his mind with new power. He said that he had never united himself with the Church, which with his present feelings he would most gladly do. He then asked if it would be agreeable to me to come to his room on the morrow and administer the Communion, adding that, as he had not been baptized, he desired that ordinance at the same time. The day following was the Sabbath, and a most heavenly day. In fulfilment of his wishes, in his own quiet room, a company of seven persons celebrated together the Lord's supper. With hymns, selections from the Scripture, and devotional exercises, we went back in thought to the 'large upper room' where Christ first instituted the Holy Supper in the midst of his disciples. Previous to the breaking of bread, William Cullen Bryant was baptized. With snow-white head and flowing beard, he stood like one of the ancient Prophets."

From Naples the Bryants journeyed to Rome. There thirteen days were spent in the society of Crawford, Story, Harriet Hosmer, Fredrika Bremer and others, and here, too, Bryant met for the first time Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose impression of the poet is recorded in the following passage from a letter: —

"Yesterday, while we were at dinner, Mr. Bryant called. I never saw him but once before, and that was at the door of our little red cottage in Lenox, he sitting in a wagon with one of the Sedgwicks, merely exchanging a greeting with me from under the brim of his straw hat, and driving on. He presented himself now with a long white beard, such as a palmer might have worn as the growth of his long pilgrimages, a brow almost entirely bald, and what hair he has quite hoary; a forehead impending, yet not massive; dark, bushy eyebrows and keen eyes, without much softness in them; a dark and sallow complexion; a slender figure, bent a little with age, but at once alert and infirm. It surprised me to see him so venerable; for, as one of Apollo's kinsmen, we are inclined to attribute to them his enviable quality of never growing old. There was a weary look in his face, as if he were tired of seeing things and doing things, though with certainly enough still to see and to do, if need were. My family gathered about him, while he conversed with great readiness and simplicity about his travels, and whatever other subject came up, telling us that he had been abroad five times, and was getting a little homesick, and had no more eagerness for sights, though his 'gals' (as he called his daughter and another young lady) dragged him out to see the wonders of Rome again. His manner and his whole aspect are very particularly plain, though not affectedly so; but it seems as if in the decline of life, and the security of his position, he had put off whatever artificial polish he may have heretofore had, and resumed the simpler habits and deportment of his early New England breeding. Not but what you discover, nevertheless, that he is a man of refinement, who has seen the world, and is well aware of his own

place in it. He spoke with great pleasure of his recent visit to Spain. I introduced the subject of Kansas, and methought his face forthwith assumed something of the bitter keenness of the editor of a political newspaper while speaking of the triumph of the administration over the free-soil opposition. . . . Bryant was not in the least degree excited about this or any other subject. He uttered neither passion nor poetry, but excellent good sense, and accurate information, on whatever subject transpired; a very pleasant man to associate with, but rather cold I should imagine, if one should seek to touch his heart with one's own. He shook hands kindly all around, but not with any warmth of gripe, although the ease of his deportment had put us on sociable terms with him."

To this description, which, while wanting in sympathy, gives a remarkably distinct and vivid picture of the man, may be added another of a meeting at the house of the Brownings in Florence a few days later: —

"Mr. Bryant, as usual, was homely and plain of manner, with an old-fashioned dignity, nevertheless, and a remarkable deference and gentleness of tone in addressing Mrs. Browning. I doubt, however, whether he has any high appreciation, either of her poetry or her husband's, and it is my impression that they care as little about his. . . . I heard her ask Mr. Bryant if he did not mean to revisit Europe, and heard him answer, not uncheerfully, taking hold of his white hair, 'It is getting rather too late in the evening, now.' If any old age can be cheerful, I should think his might be; so good a man, so cool, so calm, so bright, too, you may say. His life has been like the days that end in pleasant sunsets. He has a great loss, however, — or what ought to be a great loss, — soon to be encountered in the death of his wife, who, I think, can hardly live to reach America. He is not eminently an affectionate man. I take him to be one who cannot get closely home to his sorrow, nor feel it so sensibly as he gladly would; and, in consequence of that deficiency, the

world lacks substance to him. It is the result, perhaps, of his not having sufficiently cultivated his emotional nature. His poetry shows it, and his personal intercourse, though kindly, does not stir one's blood in the least."

Hawthorne, like others, it is seen, was impressed and rather repelled by a certain coldness in Bryant, which was transfigured by some into austerity, but which by Hawthorne was accepted as the sign of a real defect in his emotional nature. How far he was justified in this stricture it is difficult to determine. Here again it must be remembered that Bryant was the product of Puritanism, and that the Puritan exterior is characterized by dignity, gravity and reticence. No small measure of Bryant's apparent coldness or aloofness may, therefore, be attributed to a deep-seated reserve, natural, temperamental, inherited. In this case Hawthorne is scarcely a fair witness against Bryant, since he recoiled from everything even vaguely suggestive of that Puritanism which he hated even while he was fascinated by it, and of which he was but too ready to see only the unattractive side. It is noteworthy that while Lowell made the same charge against Bryant in his *Fable for Critics*, he afterward acknowledged that he had not done him justice.[1] And although we ourselves, in speaking of the lines added by Bryant to the *Hymn to Death* in memory of his father, seemed to find a certain falling off in the power of imaginative expression in dealing with death as a personal bereavement compared with

[1] "As late as 1887 he characterized his poem written for Bryant's birthday [*On Board the '76*] as a kind of palinode to what he said of him in the *Fable*." Horace E. Scudder: *James Russell Lowell: A Biography*. Vol. I, p. 253.

his treatment of the same theme in its more abstract and general aspect, we have also had occasion to point out, in other poems, passages which if not passionate, precisely, in their expression of grief, are at least infused with a poignancy of sentiment that is equally stirring to the emotions, — such poems as the sonnet to his dying sister, *The Death of the Flowers*, *"The May Sun sheds an Amber Light"* and nearly all the poems written to his wife. Not till sorrow had been brought under control and been played over by those reflections that inspire hope and peaceful resignation to nature's law, did it awaken in Bryant the need of rhythmical expression. Yet this does not make his sorrow any the less deep or genuine. Grief and despair ordinarily go hand and hand in poetry, but because Bryant preserves a sweet serenity in the face of affliction there is no reason to suppose that he did not feel deeply, and that life itself in its intensity was as remote as mist upon mountains, as empty of real substance for the heart as the shifting colours of a splendid autumn sunset. It is nearer the truth to see in this spiritual form one indication the more of that inherent Puritanism of the poet which here displays itself in an abiding faith in the goodness of God and in the promises of religion.

As for the man himself, in the more direct revelation of his personality, though stern and somewhat forbidding in his intercourse with strangers, and though not outwardly expansive to any great degree even among his friends, there was in Bryant's nature a tenderness that is felt throughout in his devotion to those who had any claim upon his heart. His attitude in his family life was not conspicuous for demonstra-

tive displays of affection. We are told, for example, that he did not approve of the practice of making presents, and that this side of the observance of Christmas was omitted in his household; also that as a parent he was strict in all matters of discipline and in the exacting of respect and obedience. In this regard, however, what we see is rather the result of his own New England upbringing and the persistence of certain puritanical traits of character and temperament rather than any individual idiosyncrasy. More personal is his deep and tender sympathy with children, his own and others, which enabled him to enter into their play on their own terms and to win their regard and confidence. And there is living to-day at least one who loves to recall how, when she was a child and living in the old place at Cummington, to which Bryant returned in later years, the poet would descend upon her in her play, pick her up and carry her on his shoulder into the dining room and place her among the guests at his table.

But most of all Bryant experienced a deep and lasting devotion to his wife, which, if not passionate on the one hand or richly romantic on the other, was no less tender and genuine. And her loss, when it came, proved as great as Hawthorne thought it should prove. It did not, however, occur so soon as that writer had anticipated. Mrs. Bryant lived to return to America, after a brief stay in England, and for several years thereafter. But death was merely postponed, and its forecasting shadow lengthened over their lives from day to day.

CHAPTER XII

THE CIVIL WAR

BRYANT returned to find the country in a turmoil of political excitement. Every day the struggle between North and South was growing more desperate and embittered. The slaveholders were still in almost complete control of all branches of the Federal Government, but, as that movement which had welded all elements of opposition into the new Republican party increased in strength and organization, they saw their supremacy assailed and their prestige diminished. As a result there began to be heard from the South violent threats of disunion. To add to the excitement, shortly after Bryant's return, occurred John Brown's famous raid at Harper's Ferry. Bryant could not approve the act, but the nobility of the man appealed to him. His own part was now clearly and firmly taken. The South must be dealt with, not indulgently as in the past with every species of concession and conciliation, but strictly and sternly it must be made to feel the necessity of submission to the will of the people.

"The slave interest," he writes in an editorial, "is a spoiled child; the Federal Government is its foolishly indulgent nurse. Everything it has asked for has been eagerly given it; more eagerly still if it cries after it; more eagerly still if it threatens to cut off its nurse's ears. The more we give it the harder it cries, and the more furious its threats;

and now we have Northern men writing long letters to persuade their readers that it will actually cut off its nurse's ears if we exercise the right of suffrage, and elect a President of our own choice, instead of giving it one of its own favourites."

The time for exercising this right of suffrage was now at hand. But first it was necessary for the Republicans to select their candidate. Bryant's choice, which was eventually that of his party, was determined in the following manner: In 1859 he was asked to preside at a lecture by the young Illinoisian whom he had met so many years before while crossing the plains for the first time. Bryant had since heard much of Lincoln from his brother at Princeton, and the erstwhile captain of volunteers had already become a national figure through his debates with Douglas. Bryant consented, and so impressed was he by the character and personality, as well as by the arguments, of the Western man, that whereas he had previously hesitated between Chase and Seward, he now gave the strong support of the *Post* to Lincoln. That statesman seems to have conceived a regard equally high for Bryant. "It was worth the journey to the East merely to see such a man," he said the day after his lecture. The relations between the two remained close all during the time that Lincoln was President, and perhaps it is not too much to say that Bryant was one of those advisers to whom Lincoln lent a most respectful ear, whether in public or private counsels; although there may have been times when the freedom with which Bryant, as the older man and as one whose position in the party entitled him to a peculiar degree of frankness, exercised the prerogative of advising and criticising

the chief executive, tried the patience of that official who, more than any other in his high office, seems to have had a perception of his own individual responsibility, almost of destiny.

Bryant's poetry[1] of the years 1859, 1860 and 1861 reflects more than his ordinary mood of meditative sadness. Death at this time not only carried off a young grandson and a young woman, Miss Waterston, one of the friends of whom he was fond, but made serious inroads in the ranks of his contemporaries and friends. Bryant had long accustomed himself to the thought of death, but he now begins to write of it in a vein more personal and gloomy, although the gloom is never so profound as to preclude that bright sense of a future life which, as in *The Cloud on the Way*, is its habitual corrective. The note of melancholy is most unrelieved in *The New and the Old*, in which the very joyousness of spring brings a certain depression of the spirit: —

> "What am I doing, thus alone,
> In the glory of Nature here,
> Silver-haired, like a snow-flake thrown
> On the greens of the springing year?
>
> "Only for brows unploughed by care,
> Eyes that glisten with hope and mirth,
> Cheeks unwrinkled, and unblanched hair,
> Shines this holiday of the earth."

But the finest expression of this mood is contained in *Waiting by the Gate*, a poem in which the sadness is subdued, as in *June*, to an imaginative conception and to a sweet and brooding sentiment evoked by the

[1] In 1858, after his return from Europe, he had written the song beginning, "These prairies glow with flowers" (at Princeton, Ill.) and *The Song of the Sower*.

spectacle of those whom the poet, waiting for the hinges to turn for him, watches as they pass through the gate into darkness.

"Again the hinges turn, and a youth, departing, throws
A look of longing backward, and sorrowfully goes;
A blooming maid, unbinding the roses from her hair,
Moves mournfully away from amid the young and fair."

This is the kind of picture for which Blake would have loved to draw such symbolical designs as he made for Blair's *Grave;* and yet they are not needed, for the picture is complete and vivid in the presentment of the poet, who shows himself endowed, in this instance, with a quality of the imagination not unlike that of the English visionary artist.

It will be noted that the images in this poem are mostly of the young: —

"I grieve for life's bright promise, just shown and then withdrawn."

It was because of his own recent personal experience of this form of bereavement that this was so. Usually he had contemplated death in its relation to old age, and through the application of philosophy, he had come to accept it and justify it, even, in his conception of the scheme of divine order in human affairs, as the fitting termination of a long life. That the old should die seemed natural and even beneficent: —

"Behold, the portals open, and o'er the threshold, now,
There steps a weary one with a pale and furrowed brow.
His count of years is full, his allotted task is wrought;
He passes to his rest from a place that needs him not."

But that the young should die is an inexplicable fatality that fills him with a profound and brooding sadness, and with a very special perception of pathos and mystery: —

"Once more the gates are opened; an infant group go out,
The sweet smile quenched forever, and stilled the sprightly shout.
O frail, frail tree of Life, that on the greensward strows
Its fair young buds unopened, with every wind that blows!"

And, again, the line,

"And prints of little feet mark the dust along the way."

There were, as we have said, outside of his own circle, other losses during those years which he shared with the world at large. Many distinguished persons both at home and abroad died, and for Bryant their passing seemed like the darkness of the night when the stars have been swallowed up. This thought he expresses with sober fancifulness in *The Constellations*, at the end of which he comforts himself with the reflection that other luminaries no less brilliant will arise to fill their places, although his eyes are too dim to discern them.

One of those who had passed away was Washington Irving. Bryant had known him less than he had known Cooper, but at the request of the New York Historical Society he undertook to deliver a memorial address at the great meeting which was held on Irving's birthday, in the Academy of Music. This was the greatest occasion of the sort at which he had yet officiated. Three or four thousand people gathered to hear him, and his address was everywhere received as the highest tribute that had been paid to Irving's genius and character.

From these mortuary matters it is pleasant to turn to the brighter side of Bryant's life at this period. Not all his poems of these years deal with death. Nature still exerts her old spell over him in *The Tides*, *The Third of November, 1861*, and his love of freedom,

in the ringing ode to *Italy*. Old age, if it had deepened, in a way, his temperamental melancholy, had at the same time softened and mellowed him. He is not without a vein of quaint and playful humour which comes out in such a familiar letter as that which he wrote to his friend and old clergyman, the Rev. Dr. Dewey, inviting him to come and visit him at Roslyn: —

"NEW YORK, *April* 30, 1860.

"If we will have you? Doctor,

"'What words have passed thy lips unweighed!'

If the earth will have the spring — if the sunflower will have sunshine — if the flock will have grass. You might as well put an *if* between a hungry man and his dinner. You shall come to Roslyn, you and your Sultana, and shall be welcome, and treated *en rois*. If I were writing for the press, I should not say *en rois*, for in public I hold it my duty to maintain on all occasions the supremacy and sufficiency of the English language: but I have said *en rois* because it came into my head. Come on, and we will make the most of you both, and anybody else you choose to bring with you — that our poor means allow. You shall not be walked out more than you absolutely choose, nor asked to look at anything. You shall have full leave to bury yourself in books, or write, or think, or smoke away your time, and I will make a provision of segars for your idle hours, with the prudent toleration which the innocent have for the necessary vices of others. I have a coachman, and he shall take you about the country when you and Mrs. Dewey take a fancy for a ride. And having done this, I will neglect you, for I am afraid that is what you like, to your heart's content. And then, if — for I, too, must have my if — if you will only stay over Sunday, you shall be asked to preach by our orthodox Presbyterian minister, who enquires when Dr. Dewey is expected, for he wants to ask him to preach. Come, then, prepared for ten days'

sojourn, with a stock of patience in your heart, and a sermon or two in your pocket, of your second or third quality, for we are quite plain people here, and anything very fine is wasted upon us."

This letter gives us a glimpse of Bryant in that pleasant and retired life to which he was more and more drawn from the active world of journalism and politics. He was now sixty-six years of age, and he was beginning to experience a physical distaste for hard work. Gladly, if circumstances had permitted him, would he have retired altogether. But there was now heard a call throughout the nation to which no man with his sense of duty could turn a deaf ear so long as he was able to perform the slightest service. So, as Lincoln's administration began, and the Civil War broke out, we see Bryant once more at his post, taking as active a part as he had thirty years before, and forgetting his own predilection for poetry and retirement in the need of the nation.

The months between the election of Lincoln and the outbreak of hostilities were passed by Bryant in active efforts to influence the policy of the administration. From the first he insisted on the choice of strong and honest men like Chase and Welles for the cabinet, and on a firm and unyielding attitude toward the rebellious and seceding states. It was a time of great turmoil and confusion at the North, and there were almost as many counsels as there were leaders of the people and of public opinion. Looking back upon this period it seems curious that there could still have been many to whom the course to be pursued was yet not clear and to whom the idea of a peaceful adjustment by compromise and concession still seemed

possible. Bryant was not one of these. Nor was he one of those who would have let the Southern states go their own way and separate peacefully from the Union. The spirit of national unity spoke powerfully through all that he wrote to urge the North to vindicate the binding nature of that compact into which the colonies had originally entered when they accepted the Constitution. The South must be taught that it was not merely sectional interest that was at stake, but the interest of the country as a whole; that this was what was considered when the compact was made, and that such an agreement, gravely entered into, was not lightly to be abandoned. For Bryant, moreover, a constitutional government represented the ideal of what human government should be: there was, therefore, an element of almost religious enthusiasm in his appeal in the poem entitled *Our Country's Call*, when he writes: —

"Our country calls; away! away!
To where the blood-stream blots the green.
Strike to defend the gentlest sway
That Time in all his course has seen."

To those in England and elsewhere who heralded the early disasters of the war as making certain the success of the South and the disruption of the Union, Bryant addressed another poem, *Not Yet*, in which he says: —

"Not yet the hour is nigh when they
Who deep in Eld's dim twilight sit,
Earth's ancient kings, shall rise and say,
'Proud country, welcome to the pit!
So soon art thou, like us, brought low!'
No, sullen group of shadows, No!"

Early in the course of the war Bryant became the ardent advocate of emancipation. He had never been an abolitionist, and he would never have been willing to precipitate a conflict for the sole purpose of depriving the South of that privilege of slave-holding, which they enjoyed under the Constitution. Now, however, that war had actually come at last, and there was no longer anything to lose, he was most eager to make use of the opportunity thus offered to overthrow an institution that he recognized as not only evil in itself, but as the fundamental cause of the conflict. He was one of those who supported Frémont in his emancipation measures in Missouri, and he castigated Lincoln both for repealing those measures and for the general reluctance with which the President approached this entire subject. He formed one of a commission of leading men from New York who visited Lincoln at Washington for the purpose of ascertaining his real intention as to emancipation and to force him by their representation into some decisive action. When Lincoln's Proclamation was promulgated, Bryant, although not wholly satisfied with the terms in which it was stated, led the rejoicing; he continued, however, to make speeches and to write editorials against gradual and in favour of immediate universal emancipation, which he defended on grounds of military expediency as well as of justice and morality.

This was not the only subject on which Bryant came into conflict with the administration. Owing to the necessity for united action, he had agreed to sink economic differences so far as these related to the tariff. But new differences arose during the early days of the war with respect to the financial policy of

the government. Lincoln and his recently chosen cabinet early adopted the expedient of a greenback paper currency to replenish the national exchequer. Bryant saw all the evil that was inherent in this system and argued powerfully, in editorial after editorial and in open letters to the President that even his friends thought exceeded the freedom with which a journalist should address the executive of his own party, against a course that would debase our currency, ruin our credit and create conditions that it would take years to rectify. His sound advice was, however, disregarded, and one of the legacies of the Civil War to this country was a currency question that has disrupted political parties and time and time again seriously threatened prosperity with a panic as serious as that which resulted from the vicious system of wildcat state banks in Van Buren's administration.

Like almost every one in those days, Bryant had his own idea as to how the war should be prosecuted, and, of course, this often differed very materially from that of the administration. Here, however, he was, as he himself recognized, out of his province, and it is merely necessary to say that for a civilian with no training in military affairs Bryant's comments on the various campaigns and his suggestions for the conduct of the war often show great sense and a remarkable grasp of the principles of strategy. Altogether the exigencies of the war revealed in him, more than ever before, qualities of a high and varied statesmanship which, it seems, had fortune placed him in public office rather than in the position of an editor, might have enabled him to perform a still more valuable service to the nation as an initiator of policies of his

own than he was actually able to accomplish as the critic and censor of those of others.

It is characteristic of Bryant that while he was thus actively engaged in the controversies that arose from the conduct of the war, and from the policy of the administration, the poetry which he continued to write at intervals in his hours of leisure and seclusion was little affected by the excitement of the time except to become, by a kind of reaction, even more than usually detached and fanciful. Far-off echoes of the war, awaking, however, sorrow rather than exultation, are heard in such poems as *The Return of the Birds* and *My Autumn Walk*, but the principal pieces of the period were two long narrative poems, *Sella* and *The Little Children of the Snow*, in which, giving free rein to his imagination, and to an inventive faculty that he had not hitherto tested, he produced airy and graceful fantasies quite unlike anything else in his work.

It was at this time, too, that there may have first come to him the project of translating Homer. In re-reading the *Odyssey* he was tempted to try his hand at turning its hexameters into English blank verse. He finished the fifth book, which was printed in *The Atlantic Monthly*, and was afterwards included in the collection of *Thirty Poems* published in 1863.

This was the last separate collection that Bryant made of his verse, and its appearance, coupled with another event, a year later, marks the culmination of his career as a poet. In 1864 Bryant completed his seventieth year, and the occasion was celebrated by a dinner at the Century Club in New York, which was attended by many of the most celebrated men of letters in America, among them Emerson, who made

speeches and read poems in honour of the venerable poet. In responding, Bryant spoke of himself as "one who has carried a lantern in the night, and who perceives that its beams are no longer visible in the glory which the morning pours around him." In one sense what he said was true; for he no longer shone with that singularity which he had once enjoyed as the premier poet of America. In another sense, however, it was false, and was merely an expression of the modesty of the speaker. Never had his genius and originality been more generally and cordially recognized than at this moment. Emerson's address was the finest tribute that had yet been paid to these qualities. He said: —

"I join with all my heart in your wish to honour this native, sincere, original, patriotic poet. I say original; I have heard him charged with being of a certain school. I heard it with surprise, and asked, What school? for he never reminded me of Goldsmith, or Wordsworth, or Byron or Moore. I found him always original — a true painter of the face of this country and of the sentiment of his own people."

The public was not slow to accept Bryant at this new and high estimate of his powers, and in New York especially there grew up a pride of possession in this old poet who, in his outward appearance, even for the least poetically minded, realized so perfectly that ideal of the poetic personality which subsists in the consciousness of all men.

CHAPTER XIII

ILIAD AND *ODYSSEY*

THE close of the Civil War brought with it two events that Bryant noticed in his verse, — the assassination of Lincoln, which inspired him with a brief lyric, and in 1866 the passing of the amendment to the Constitution forbidding slavery in the United States, which he made the occasion of a noble ode on *The Death of Slavery.*

But these public matters, whether of sorrow or rejoicing, were now overshadowed by a private affliction. This was the death of Mrs. Bryant, who had long been failing and the course of whose malady the trip to Europe had only temporarily arrested. In 1865 Bryant had bought the old Snell homestead at Cummington, and rebuilt the house in the hope that a change of air from the ocean breezes of Long Island to the dry mountain air of Hampshire County might be beneficial. They were to spend the summer of 1866 there, but in May Mrs. Bryant's condition began to grow more serious, and by July 4 all thought of removing her had to be abandoned. She died on the twenty-seventh day of that month. The blow for Bryant was a heavy one. He had been peculiarly devoted to his wife, whom all agree to have been a woman of extraordinary sweetness. Her long period of invalidism had for many years

made her dependent on his care and attention, and in return he had come to feel her comradeship an essential support of his own life. He was left stunned and overwhelmed, for a time incapable, even, of answering the letters of his old friends. August and September were passed in Cummington, and in October Bryant returned to Roslyn, where the thought of his wife, now subdued to his habitual mood of brooding melancholy, inspired that poem, *October 1866*, which is the expression of his grief purged and purified by influences of natural beauty and sadness and reflections on the goodness of God and on the certainty of a future life.

Bryant's companion during the period of his greatest distress had been his younger daughter, Julia, whose health had so much suffered during the ordeal that he now determined to take her to Europe. Meanwhile, as an occupation for his own mind he provided for himself that task of translating Homer which he had already begun, in a desultory way as we have seen, three years before. To the rule of writing forty lines a day he adhered during his entire sojourn abroad. His travels took him first to Paris, but that place stirred too many remembrances for his sojourn of a fortnight there to be pleasant. As he writes in one of his letters: "You can imagine how sad the place must seem to me when I tell you that I had never visited it before but in company with some friend now no longer living." From Paris they covered the Pyrenees, into Spain, stopping on the way at Amélie-les-Bains. Here, at last, he had his holiday in the country that had so long attracted him and of which he had seen but little on an earlier occasion. But his interest in foreign travel had in a great measure left him, and on this

trip, as on his first visit to Europe, he was besieged by a constant desire to be at home.

The spring was spent in Italy. At Florence Bryant met Garibaldi and declined an invitation to accompany him to Venice. At Rome he contracted a fever brought on by a cold, and this lasted all through Germany. May found him in Paris once more, and the early summer in England, Scotland and Wales. The Welsh mountains seem to have disappointed him, as those of Italy had at an earlier day, by not proving finer than scenery at home with which he was familiar; and he reiterated the opinion before expressed, that for the American in search of the grand and picturesque in nature it is not necessary to go farther abroad than the White Mountains, the Berkshires and the Alleghanies. In view of such a sentiment, so consistently entertained and expressed from one end of his life to the other, one rather wonders at the record of Bryant's six voyages to the Old World in search of what he apparently never found. Still, these were a source of recreation to him, both of mind and of body. That the latter retained its wiry robustness is shown by the fact that during this Welsh tour he still enjoyed walking and climbing, and derived from these vigorous employments much exercise and pleasure.

In October Bryant returned to America. In spite of his age it was no life of relaxed energies to which he came back, but one of the usual active interests and occupations. It is true that he did not care to exert the same personal influence over the policy of his paper as before. This he was soon content to leave to a greater extent in the hands of younger men. But the politics of the times continued to interest him.

He rendered his opinion and judgment on the carrying out of the work of reconstruction and upon the question of protection which now that the war was over, and manufactures and commerce were beginning to resume their normal course, once more became a leading issue in our political life. He had always remained an ardent champion of free trade, had once corresponded with Cobden on the subject and had for four or five years been president of the American Free Trade League. On resigning this office in December, 1867, he was given a dinner which was attended by many of the most distinguished free-traders of the country, who recognized in Bryant the father of the movement in America.

But the work that now chiefly occupied Bryant's attention was the translation of the *Iliad*, in which he had become thoroughly engrossed. Like Hobbes at eighty-six, Bryant at seventy-three found it a form of activity peculiarly fitted to his time of life and preferred it to the greater exertion of original composition.

"At my time of life," he writes, "it is somewhat dangerous to tax the brain to any great extent. Whatever requires invention, whatever compels one to search both for new thoughts and adequate expressions wherewith to clothe them, makes a severe demand on the intellect and on the nervous system — at least I have found it so. In translating poetry — at least in translating with such freedom as blank verse allows — my only trouble is with the expression; the thoughts are already at hand."

"He worked," writes Mr. Godwin, "only in the mornings, after his usual exercise, when both body and mind were fresh. With a copy of Homer open on his desk, and a lexicon near by, he wrote for three or four hours, and then laid his papers aside for the day. There were other translations on his book-shelves, Chapman, Pope and Cowper, of

course; Voss's German version, and one in Spanish and another in Italian; later on he procured Professor Blackie's; but these he consulted only at intervals, to settle some point of construction of which he had doubts. It confused and fettered him, he said, to know how others had done a passage before him. Besides, he intended his version for popular, not learned, use, and he could give it a more popular cast, he thought, with the original text alone for his guide. The fluency with which he commonly wrote is apparent from the manuscript, where page follows page with only inconsiderable erasures. Yet, at times, there are pages almost illegible from the number of interlineations and changes. In original composition his habit was to fix his verses in his head while he was walking the fields, and to commit them to paper afterward; and, as his verbal memory was a retentive one, it is probable he pursued the same method in translating the old Greek."

He had interruptions in his work, for he was called upon to make several speeches and addresses, among which the most important was that which he delivered before the New York Historical Society in memory of his old friend and fellow-poet, Fitz-Greene Halleck, who died in 1867. He stopped also to write an occasional poem of his own, although the output of the year is not numerous — a few hymns, *A Brighter Day*, *Among the Trees* and *May Evening* — and to prepare a collection of his *Letters from the East*. The translation was completed, however, by January, 1870, and in the hands of his publisher, who issued the first volume in February and the second in June of that year.

When in 1863 Bryant had published his *Thirty Poems*, containing the version of the fifth book of the *Odyssey*, he stated in the preface the consideration that had led him to try the experiment. Cowper he regarded as the most successful of those who had essayed to

translate Homer. But, he writes, speaking of himself in the third person as the author of the volume:—

"It has always seemed to him, however, that Cowper's version had very great defects. The style of Homer is simple, and he has been praised for fire and rapidity of narrative. Does anybody find these qualities in Cowper's Homer? If Cowper had rendered him into such English as he employed in his *Task*, there would be no reason to complain; but in translating Homer he seems to have thought it necessary to use a different style from that of his original work. Almost every sentence is stiffened by some clumsy inversion; stately phrases are used where simple ones were at hand, and would have rendered the meaning of the original better. The entire version has the appearance of being hammered out with great labour, and as a whole it is cold and constrained; scarce anything seems spontaneous; it is only now and then that the translator has caught the fervour of his author. Homer, of course, wrote in idiomatic Greek, and, in order to produce either a true copy of the original, or an agreeable poem, should have been translated into idiomatic English."

This passage strikes the keynote of Bryant's own version. His object was to produce both a faithful copy of the original and to make an agreeable poem, and to accomplish these ends by writing in a simple, natural English style that would give free play to the narrative without distracting the attention of the reader by ornament and curious constructions. The medium that he chose was that with which he was most familiar, the regular iambic pentameter blank verse. Arnold in his essays *On Translating Homer*, 1861, had already launched the controversy as to the possibility of a precise metrical equivalent in English for the Greek and Roman hexameters and whether or not Homer should thus properly be translated. Bryant himself experimented with this metre, but

after several trials abandoned the attempt to bend new sails to his old masts, and returned to the measure that he had made peculiarly his own. Consequently his version has more in common with the older classical translations in historic English metres than any that have appeared since. It is like them, too, in its lack of divination of the special Greek spirit, as opposed to the general epical spirit, of the original, a striking example of which, from our more modern point of view, is the employment of the names of the Roman equivalents for the gods of the Greek Olympus. This, as Bryant asserts in his own defence, is in accordance with general usage, but it serves to separate him from that new school of translators who have seen in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* less artistic epics than poems expressive of the Greek racial genius.

Thus we may account for the want of interest displayed by the English critics in Bryant's translation. An age of critical experimentation was at hand. Bryant had approached his task in the old spirit. He had succeeded in producing an accurate and readable version of the old narrative, but its virtue was not of a kind to satisfy the artistic sense of a generation that was demanding the spirit of the Greek as it resided in the colour of the very words and constructions. Looking back over the thirty and more years that have intervened, it cannot be said that very much has come of this movement, then in its inception, either with respect to the development of the English hexameter or to the reproduction of the subtler, more indwelling spirit of the Greek original. The two intentions have drawn widely apart, and in the attempt to give the latter, the former has been abandoned, so that our

most characteristic modern version is that of Butcher and Lang, in prose. Whether English readers of the future will be satisfied with such a pedestrian rendering, or whether they will not adjudge its preciosity to be as opposed to the real spirit of the Greek original as the rhetorical paraphrases of Pope and Cowper, will remain to be seen. As for Bryant's version, its virtue, if it has any, lies in the fact that it escapes all singularity of expression, that its medium is the one which in its relation to the genius of our language most nearly corresponds to the hexameter in Greek, and that it gives what, after all, was to Homer himself the essential thing, the narrative, without adornment, addition, inversion or strange construction of any sort to distract the attention or to blur the real meaning of the poem. Nor is the value of the version as poetry inconsiderable. It has many of the virtues of Bryant's best original work in blank verse. It is so natural in expression, so thoroughly re-created in the idiom of English speech, as often to conceal the traces of the translator. It is perhaps best in the descriptive passages, where Bryant would necessarily be more at home than in the scenes of action. But even in these he is happy in preserving the heroic feeling, though, as Mr. Stedman points out, there is effected, through the very quality of his diction, some substitution of the Anglo-Saxon epic spirit for that of Homer.

Bryant's success, at home at least, was enormous. No fine considerations of art could here obscure the magnitude of his contribution to American letters. Whatever else he had done or not done, he had put Homer into an idiom that could be understood by a simple and practical people to whom a distinct literary

language was and still is, perhaps fortunately, an insurmountable obstacle to the enjoyment of poetry. The considerations that had counted most with other translators of Homer were mainly æsthetic. They had chosen this form or that, one manner or another, because of what they conceived to be its essential artistic fitness. Bryant had aimed only to be faithful to this author, and understood of his readers, and he was rewarded a thousandfold by the eagerness with which his countrymen accepted the work, read it and commented on it, not only in the great reviews and magazines, but in the smallest local newspapers. Outside of his service as an original writer Bryant has also, therefore, with Longfellow, the translator of Dante, and Bayard Taylor, the translator of *Faust*, this claim for a personal place in American literature, — that he is one of the few who have naturalized in American literature the masterpieces of the literatures of other races.

A new addition of the collected poems occupied Bryant, now that the *Iliad* was off his hands. In this edition, that of 1871, he made several changes in his best-known poems, some of which did not meet with the approval of Dana. One is of peculiar interest since it shows with what scrutiny Bryant examined his own work and how sensitive he was to petty falsities, although these had for years escaped the notice of critics. In the second stanza of the *Waterfowl* he had originally written the third line —

> "As, darkly painted on the crimson sky."

This he changed to read: —

> "As, darkly seen against the crimson sky."

To Dana, who complained of the insipidity of the new rendering, he defended the alteration as follows: —

"From a very early period — I am not sure that it was not from the very time that I wrote the poem — there seemed to me an incongruity between the idea of a figure painted on the sky and a figure moving, 'floating,' across its face. [The line following that in question reads, "Thy figure floats along."] If the figure were painted, then it would be fixed."

That Dana prevailed upon him in spite of this explanation is shown by the fact that on several other occasions when the poem was reprinted, the original reading was restored. This course is followed by Mr. Godwin in his definitive edition of the poet's works, but the emendation unfortunately persists even in recent editions founded upon that of 1871.

Bryant's old friend Verplanck died in 1870, and Bryant was once more called upon to deliver an address before the New York Historical Society. Demands of this sort were now frequently made upon him, as well as for reviews and other literary work. One task that he accepted was the editorship of an anthology, the *Library of Poetry and Song*. Many others, however, he was forced to decline partly on grounds of age and partly because he was already engaged once more in a new labour of his own. This was the translation of the *Odyssey*. Writing to his brother John in 1870, he says: —

"I have begun the translation of the *Odyssey*, but I do not intend to hurry the task, nor even to translate with as much diligence as I translated the *Iliad*; so I may never finish it. But it will give me an occupation which will not be an irksome one, and will furnish me with a reason for declining other literary tasks, and a hundred engagements which I want some excuse besides old age for declining."

Bryant might well at the age of seventy-six regard with some doubt the probability of his ever finishing so great a task as he had before him. The *Iliad* had taken four years and the *Odyssey* could scarcely be completed in fewer. He was in the best of health, however, and took every precaution to keep himself so. His life was methodically planned, and the hours of work were interspersed with hours of recreation and exercise. Every morning before breakfast he went through certain gymnastic exercises; he walked regularly when in the country, ate simply and with careful choice, drank little wine and used no tobacco. A report had been circulated that he used quinine as a stimulant when working, and that from this habit deafness had resulted. The story was false, for Bryant was not deaf and used no drugs or narcotics for any purpose.

He divided his time among his three homes, spending his winters in the city, the spring and early summer in Roslyn and the rest of the year in Cummington. Wherever he was, however, he worked steadily at the *Odyssey*, and with greater rapidity than he had anticipated, so that instead of taking longer or as long as the *Iliad*, by the end of April, 1871, twelve books were in the hands of the printer. The rest of the work was finished, in spite of many interruptions, by December. The first volume had already appeared, and the second came out before the close of the year.

CHAPTER XIV

CLOSING YEARS

In January, after the *Odyssey* had appeared, Bryant started on a winter tour that comprehended Nassau, Cuba and Mexico. His welcome to the last-named country was extraordinary. It had for its basis, not only his reputation as a man of letters, but his friendship for Mexico in the years leading up to the Mexican War. Hence he was treated more like a visiting statesman than a private poet, and was overwhelmed with courtesies and invitations from President Juarez and his ministers and from society generally. A great reception was tendered him at the capital by the Geographical and Statistical Society, of which he had been elected an honorary member. Being called upon to speak, he preceded his remarks with a few words of Castilian, which threw the Mexicans into raptures.

Extraordinary as was this episode, it was but typical of much that marked the closing years of Bryant's life. Both from his reputation as a poet, and from his service as a statesman and editor, he had become a national figure. Everywhere he went men sought to do him honour. Even in the South he was enthusiastically received, and at a reception in the city of Charleston he was addressed by one speaker as the author of *The Song of Marion's Men* — a song that "had been

sung in many a Southern bivouac, and warmed the soldier's heart at many a Confederate camp-fire."

In his own city Bryant held a place apart in popular regard. For a long time no public function at which there was speechmaking had been complete without his presence. The first notable occasion of this kind at which he was called upon to preside was the banquet given by the Press to the Hungarian patriot, Louis Kossuth, in 1851. Since then his services had been in constant demand for dinners and meetings, openings and anniversaries. After 1870, however, these occasions increased to such an extent that his speeches and addresses constituted his principal form of literary activity. How he could have stood the strain of the composition and delivery of so many set pieces of oratory, crowding his days and nights with almost constant declamation, well-nigh passes comprehension. But the recognition which so much publicity implied was pleasant to the old man, and he played his part in the ritual of civic celebration with complete enjoyment of his own prominence in the proceedings. For while not vain, Bryant was well aware of the position to which his work as a poet and statesman entitled him, and he accepted without inward question, yet with a quiet and composed dignity, the upper seat set apart for him by his fellow-citizens. Of course there was much that was bourgeois and unintelligent in this tribute to a poet by many who, no doubt, did not take the trouble to read his work, and would have been unable to appreciate it if they had. And no doubt, too, as Mr. Stedman suggests, he owed his prestige and his ability to touch the imagination of the multitude in a commercial city, in part at least, to his own

worldly success, to the fact that he was no threadbare poet, but a capable and prosperous man of affairs. This circumstance, however, carried with it its own distinct advantage.

"It brought him near .... to the hosts of the Philistines, but it also impressed them with a conviction that there must be something in poetry after all. They saw him visibly haloed with a distinction beyond that which wealth and civic influence could bestow. Besides, even Philistia has its æsthetic rituals and pageantry, and it was with a gracious and picturesque sense of the fitness of things that he bore his stately part in our festivals and processions. To this extent he was conventional, but he made conventionalism suggestive and often the promoter of thought and art."

Although familiarly known in the newspapers as "the old man eloquent," Bryant was not, says Mr. Godwin, "an orator in the strictest sense of the term. He wanted the passion and enthusiasm that are necessary to the orator. But, by perseverance and hard work in overcoming his native shyness, he had gradually acquired an easy and graceful way of addressing public assemblages."

"He was always," writes Dr. Ripley, "the honoured guest of the evening, and the moment in which he was to be called upon to speak was awaited with eager expectation that never ended in disappointment. He was singularly happy in seizing the tone of the company, no matter what were the circumstances or the occasion; his remarks were not only pertinent but eminently felicitous; with no pretensions to artificial eloquence, he was always impressive, often pathetic, and sometimes quietly humorous, with a zest and pungency that touched the feelings of the audience to the quick."

Bryant's addresses were usually composed in advance and delivered from memory, although he occa-

sionally spoke extempore. While in most instances bearing witness in their style of presentation to the purpose for which they were written, and while being graceful and appropriate rather than profound and exhaustive in their treatment of the wide range of subjects which they cover, from a discussion on *Our Native Fruits and Flowers*, delivered at the opening of a horticultural exhibition, to a popular address on *Italian Unity*, many of them contain much that is interesting in itself and characteristic of Bryant's mind. Foremost among them are naturally those dealing with literary subjects. He was frequently called upon by organizations of American citizens of foreign extraction to deliver addresses in honour of their representative national poets and writers. Goethe, Schiller, Burns, Scott and Shakespeare were all treated in this way, most of them more than once; and while such occasions demanded a somewhat exaggerated insistence upon the purely national side of their character, they furnished him with an opportunity for some of his best critical writing. The tone of those discourses may be judged from the following extracts from two different addresses on Burns: —

"Burns was made by the greatness of his sympathies — sympathies acute and delicate, yet large, comprehensive, boundless. They were warmest and strongest toward those of his own kind, yet they overflowed upon all sentient beings — upon the animal in his stall; upon the 'wee, sleekit, cowerin', timorous beastie' dislodged from his autumnal covert; upon the very field-flower, overturned by his share and crushed among the stubble. And in all this we feel that there is nothing strained or exaggerated, nothing affected or put on, nothing childish or silly, but all that is true, genuine, healthy, manly, noble; we honour, we venerate

the poet while we read; we take the expression of these sympathies to our hearts and fold it in our memory forever.

. . . . . .

"He possessed, in as high degree, I think, as ever man possessed, the power of which Coleridge speaks in defining the term genius, the power to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with appearances which the experience of years had rendered familiar. The commonest objects, incidents of the slightest apparent significance, were taken up by him and given back to us, transfigured and glorified by the thoughts which he had connected with them, and which he had expressed in verse that will endure as long as our language. It is as if a magician had scooped up a handful of gravel from the trodden highway and shown it, in his palm, transformed to grains of glittering gold and precious stones resplendent with an inward light."

There is nothing very profound in this kind of interpretation; but it is so clearly, and simply, and often, as in the last sentence, so imaginatively expressed, as to bring straight home to the minds and hearts of the least literary in his audience, an impression of the profound human significance of the work of the poet.

There was another side of the public life of the city in which Bryant appeared as a central figure in his rôle of orator. All his life he had interested himself in municipal improvement, and many of the finest features of the enlarged city owed much to him in the shape of suggestion and support. Among them was Central Park. Twenty years earlier he had favoured the conversion of the country that then covered the site into a vast playground. Now he was almost universally the high priest at the ceremonies that attended the installation of each new statue on the Mall. From the

artistic point of view Bryant's complicity in the disfiguration of a noble avenue by the worst statuary in America somewhat offsets the moral example of his public-spiritedness in this instance. But the civic spirit which, whatever its defects in taste and judgment, was nobly represented by Bryant, seems in a large degree to have died out with him. Even in the square which bears his name there is no representation of him good, bad or indifferent; and New York, the great city of commerce and trade, literary centre as it so often claims to be, seems to have lost the remembrance of its really great men of letters, together with all sense of identity with the smaller town from which it has sprung.

Bryant's sense of public service did not fail to extend itself to Cummington, the town of his birth, to which he now returned for a part of every year. He bought land and erected a library at his own expense, and stocked it with some six thousand volumes. He also built a schoolhouse outside of the town and near his own residence. These things he owed to Cummington for the pleasure he derived from his life there during his last years. Often he was joined by his brothers John and Arthur, and the three old men would roam the country together as they had in their boyhood, revisiting old scenes and reviving memories of the past.

Thus accompanied there was little sadness in the thought of the long life that lay behind him. Alone, however, he brooded much on those who had gone before, and at times he was overwhelmed by the influx of such thoughts as he expresses in *The Flood of Years*. This poem, which it is customary to compare

with *Thanatopsis*, for the purpose of noting the extraordinary evenness of Bryant's production throughout his life from first to last, was the most important production of these last years. In 1872, after three years of silence, he had resumed original writing from time to time in such poems as *Tree Burial*, *A Legend of the Delawares*, *The Two Travellers*, *Christmas in 1875* and *Our Fellow-Worshippers*. *The Flood of Years* was written in 1876 and is the last poem but one that he was to write. This one, *A Lifetime*, which belongs to the same year, fitly closes his work, as it is a retrospective summary of his own life. It is fitting, too, that it should have been composed at Cummington, where he was surrounded by the scenes that had inspired his earliest verses and amid which he sees himself once more: —

"A delicate child and slender,
With locks of light-brown hair,
From knoll to knoll is leaping
In the breezy summer air.

"He stoops to gather blossoms
Where the running waters shine;
And I look on him with wonder,
His eyes are so like mine."

Step by step he follows the progress of his later years, with all their sorrow and all their happiness, until he is left —

"gazing with the twilight
Where the gleaming meadows lie,
And the wind of night is swaying
The trees with a heavy sigh."

Meanwhile, though he wrote little prose, he did not altogether forsake the profession of literature. He wrote an introduction for a *Popular History of the*

United States, as well as one for the anthology which he had earlier edited. He also prepared an introduction and notes for a new edition of Shakespeare. The last two tasks were performed when he was past eighty years. His birthday when he reached that age was duly celebrated, and a dinner was also given in his honour at Chicago, his two brothers presiding in his absence. Bryant was overwhelmed by these observances, and "quite uncertain," as he writes, "how to take the compliments 'showered' upon me by the newspapers." One reason that he gives for the good opinion of his contemporaries is "that as a general rule, I have been in no man's way. I have not been a competitor with any man for office 'or honour, and the feeling of animosity which is awakened by rivalry has had no occasion to manifest itself."

Once, indeed, when Greeley was nominated in opposition to General Grant by the Democratic party, Bryant had been spoken of, by some of those who were dissatisfied with the choice, as the candidate of a faction. But at the first rumour Bryant had taken the opportunity to put away the honour. Possibly had it come earlier in life he might have accepted, although it was not entirely owing to age that he declined, but to a feeling of unfitness, as he says, in every particular, for the office. There was always in Bryant's nature this element of natural modesty which was not in the least a want of courage in his convictions, but rather a total lack of personal ambition for his own advancement.

It was recognition of his long life of disinterested service that toward the end of his career made him popular with all candidates and all parties. Such

attentions, however, did not cause him to relax his vigilance or to cease his attack against corrupt men and measures. But it was in his attitude toward politics that his age most asserted itself as his life drew to a close. He did not altogether lose his interest, but the chicanery of the machines of both parties disgusted him, and he confessed himself unable to follow the trend of public affairs. He had ceased to be an active partisan, and having in his day been both Democrat and Republican, towards the end he anticipated that movement of independence in politics which became a powerful factor in the eighties. The last presidential contest that he lived to witness was that between Hayes and Tilden. Before the nominations were made he wrote to an English friend as follows: —

"You complain that you do not understand our politics. Neither do I. Our country seems to me to be disgraced by the conduct of both parties. Neither seems to have any other object than to get or keep in power, and keep the other out. There is no longer any contention about measures and beliefs. Each party is decided in regard to the great questions before the country, and the consequence is that those questions are left to take care of themselves, and no party gives its earnest and steady efforts to bringing them to a right solution."

In 1876 Bryant was invited to prepare an ode for the centennial exhibition at Philadelphia, but complied by writing merely a short hymn which was sung by a choir at the opening exercises. This same year he was formally presented with a commemorative silver vase, emblematic, in its intricate design, of his treatment of American nature. In 1877 he spoke at the unveiling of the statue of Fitz-Greene Halleck in Central Park and attended a reception given in honour

of his birthday at the Goethe Club in New York. All these honours he accepted with unvarying modesty, speaking of himself always in a voice of semi-humorous depreciation. It was his age, he said, to which honour was being done and he accepted on behalf of the generation to which he belonged.

And now we come to the last year of Bryant's life. It was passed, up to the end, in the activities of a public nature with which he had become identified in late years. There were speeches to be made and distinguished visitors, of whom he always had many, to be seen and entertained. Every day he went to his office, walking there and back from his city home, a distance of nearly three miles. Thus it may be seen that his bodily vigour was not greatly impaired by age, while his manner and his temper, it is said by all of those who knew him at different periods of his life, lost something of the brusqueness and irritability that had characterized them and became softened and sweetened. How long he might thus have gone on mellowing from year to year it is impossible to say, had there not in 1878 occurred the accident that resulted in his death.

There was a certain fateful fitness in the circumstances that attended this accident. On the 29th of April he was appointed to deliver an oration at the unveiling of the statue of Mazzini at Central Park.

"The delivery of the oration," writes General James Grant Wilson,[1] ". . . it is to be feared drew too heavily on the poet's failing powers. It was uttered with an unusual depth of feeling, and for the first time in his public addresses, so far as I am aware, he hesitated and showed some difficulty

[1] *Bryant and His Friends.*

in finding his place in the printed copy that was spread before him, and in proceeding with his remarks. During the delivery of his speech he was but slightly exposed to the hot sun, an umbrella being held over his

"'Good gray head, which all men knew,'

till he reached his peroration, when he stepped from under its shelter and, looking up at the bust, delivered with fervour and great emphasis the concluding paragraph of his address: —

"'Image of the illustrious champion of civil and religious liberty, cast in enduring bronze to typify the imperishable vision of the original! Remain for eyes yet to come where we place thee, in the midst of millions; remain till the day shall dawn — far distant though it be — when the rights and duties of human brotherhood shall be acknowledged by all the races of mankind.'"

After the conclusion of the ceremonies Bryant walked through the Park with General Wilson to the latter's house. Here a sudden failure of his strength must have overtaken him, for, when he had reached the top of the steps, he fell backward and sustained a severe blow on the head. He was at once taken home. His mind was wandering, and it was decided that he had sustained a concussion of the brain. For about three weeks he survived, without, however, entirely regaining consciousness at any time, his state, after a hemorrhage of the brain, becoming one of complete coma. On the 12th of June he passed away quietly without suffering. The funeral, which was held at the Unitarian Church of All Souls, was very simple, but it was largely attended, and the mourning was general throughout the city. He was buried by the side of his wife in the village cemetery at Roslyn.

CHAPTER XV

CONCLUSION

"BRYANT'S literary career, if we assume it to have been begun at the date of the first publication of *The Embargo* in 1808, extends over the unexampled period of threescore and ten years."

So wrote Dana in 1878, when he himself had reached the patriarchal age of ninety-one. And indeed, outside of the remarkable precocity manifested by Bryant in his poetical beginnings, a precocity equalled only by Cowley, Chatterton and a very few others in the entire range of English literature, there is no aspect of his life more striking than this extraordinary extension of his active career over a term so greatly in excess of the total span of ordinary human existence. And yet when we reflect upon this prolongation of his productivity through more than two generations, we are still more struck by the small amount of poetry produced by him during this period. Though he lived to be one of the oldest poets of his race, his output might easily be that of the shortest-lived. He wrote less even than Keats, whose death occurred in his twenty-sixth year; and Shelley, who did not live to complete his twenty-ninth, wrote fully three times as much as Bryant.

The reason for this lay, as we have indicated, in the fact that Bryant, even in his most productive period,

devoted only a small portion of his energies to the writing of poetry. In this he did not so much follow his own inclination as yield to the exigencies of his situation in life. It was necessary for him first of all to provide for himself and his family, and at the time when he appeared there were in America but few opportunities to make literature a paying profession. There was no great organization of literary activity then as there has been in England continuously for three hundred years, and as there is beginning to be at present in this country at the centres. There was not even a Grub Street to afford a temporary refuge until some patron or rich publisher should discover the youthful genius and make him independent of the struggle for existence. Nor had the universities as yet become the asylums they did later in the case of Lowell and Longfellow, for men of literary tastes and scholarly acquirements. Thus Bryant, at the very moment when he came into full possession of his powers, was forced to accept employment in one uncongenial pursuit after another, each of which made more exacting demands upon his time and attention.

There was, of course, nothing peculiar to Bryant's lot in this fatality. He was merely the victim of circumstances that have offered the gravest obstacles to the development of native literature in America. And it is the best proof of the real vitality of his genius that it did not succumb to disadvantageous conditions, but continued expressive and productive, like a hardy plant that manages to keep its head above a weedy and rocky soil, throughout a long life. Bryant's precocity was no boyish blossoming of an ideality doomed to early extinction because it cannot

bear to be transplanted from a literary soil to the spiritually arid wastes of our commercial cities, such as we too often see in our American colleges; it did, indeed, give promise of more than was ever actually fulfilled, for there is not that growth in Bryant's expression which might have been expected from *Thanatopsis;* but for all that it was the authentic springtime of a genius powerful enough to triumph over adverse conditions and to prove that even American materialism was amenable to the soft breezes and warm rains of the spirit.

Bryant has been subjected to such extremes of criticism that it is small wonder if even to-day his place in American literature is still a matter of dispute. He has in his time suffered both eulogy and detraction, to an unusual degree. In a way it has been a misfortune for him to have been the earliest of American poets. He appeared much more remarkable to his early contemporaries than he ever can to us, because of the contrast which he presented with what had gone before. And later, after a period in which he suffered somewhat of an eclipse through the rise of new schools and new poets to contest with him the palm of supremacy, his great age, the traditions of an earlier day which he represented, his personality which so perfectly embodied the prophetic and seer-like aspect of the poetic ideal, and finally local pride in the possession of a poet whom New York could produce to oppose the claims of its rival, Boston, to literary supremacy, — all these tended to create a regard for Bryant that was rather personal than literary. Reaction in each instance has naturally carried Bryant's reputation lower than it might ever have

sunk, had it not been for these adventitious circumstances, resulting in a considerably higher estimate than the work of the poet judged by itself could sustain. To-day the tendency, just as in the time of Griswold, at the height of the first reaction, is to regard him rather as a figure, a landmark in the literary history of America, than as a true and original poet.

Yet the tradition of eulogy still continues, though mainly among those who remember Bryant in his second prime. Only the other day an old poet, since dead,[1] wrote comparing him with one of the greatest of English poets: "The *Excursion* is a tiresome poem, which contains several exquisite episodes. Mr. Bryant knew how to write exquisite episodes and to omit the platitudes."

Even were it true, as it is not, that Bryant never fell into dreary, didactic commonplaces, such praise is still as far from proper perception and real appreciation as the narrowly depreciatory tone of another critic[2] for whom Bryant is merely a provincial English poet, expressing "a somewhat formal sentimentality which had hardly characterized vital work in England for fifty years." Of course, Bryant is much more than this. He is an American poet whose native inspiration is so imaginatively and sincerely expressed that it is of little consequence in what school his style was formed. Some school is necessary for every poet, and that Bryant chose the one he did, simply goes to show that provincial America lagged some fifty years behind

[1] The late Richard Henry Stoddard: Introduction to the Roslyn Edition of Bryant's poems, 1903.

[2] Barrett Wendell: *A Literary History of America*, 1900.

England when he began to write. For the rest, it is by no means self-evident that a school which has lost its vitality in one country may not continue to be vitally productive in another, under certain conditions of growth and development. To assert that American literature should proceed *pari passu* with English literature and that its law of progress must be determined solely by what is done on the other side of the Atlantic, is to say that the former is not and can never be a true national literature, and that it must continue to be governed by that spirit of servile imitation which ruled when Bryant first appeared and from which he rescued it.

Yet, on the other hand, he is no Wordsworth; and although we may sometimes call him the "American Wordsworth," by way of expressing what we feel to be our indebtedness to him for having rendered romantic with poetic association our American landscape, he is not for an instant seriously to be compared with that great poet-philosopher whose impress is on all English poetry since his time. It is not merely that there is in Bryant's work none of Wordsworth's mystic pantheism. There is, to offset this, his expression of the religious and moral ideals of Puritanism. It is rather that, as compared with Wordsworth, Bryant, in spite of a possibly finer artistic perception, brings to the imaginative interpretation of nature a much smaller capacity of mind and heart. Wordsworth may often indulge in platitudes, but his "exquisite episodes" are profound revelations of human sympathy and spiritual truth; whereas in Bryant, no matter how fresh or delicate or deeply felt his expression, there is almost always a touch of the obvious and

commonplace as well as the chill of any incomplete sympathy with his kind.

There can be no doubt that it is this want of either intellectual depth and originality or real warmth of sympathetic feeling that is the real source of weakness in Bryant's poetry. He is the poet, even of nature, only in the sense of seeking to reproduce the charm of her external loveliness. He does not penetrate like Wordsworth into her fastnesses, and even the moral or religious significance which he finds in nature is less the result of any spiritualizing of her own proper life or influences, than what is brought to her by Bryant out of his inherited Puritan theology. And yet, though his limitations must be admitted, no American poet has been endowed with a finer genius for perfection than Bryant, or has had in so high a degree the artistic gift of imaginative description. It is this that gives his pictures and impressions of American landscape such vitality and power. Bryant is so faithful in his description of what is seen that the ideal element in his imitation is sometimes lost sight of, and he impresses rather by his accuracy of detail than by the broader truth of his rendering. Yet, for all this, nature in Bryant's poetry is always ideal nature. This is to say that every scene he portrays seems to live in his representation by the law of its own life, and independent of everything external to it. It is not necessary to visit Bryant's country to test the truth of his descriptions, for their reality is immediately recognized by the mind on the higher plane of the imagination which sees in them types coeval with nature itself — features, we may call them, of that unchanging inner world which no less

than earth has its mountains and valleys, its brooks and its rivers, and its vast, shoreless seas.

There is, as we have said, something of the painter in Bryant's display of this power of imaginative description — in such a bit of impression, for example, as the approach of the rain in *A Rain-Dream:* —

> "The silvery streams
> Darken to veins of lead at thy approach."

And this fact is of significance in connection with his lifelong interest in art and association with artists. It makes us wonder whether under other conditions than those which actually presided over his bringing-up, his talents might not have tended as naturally toward painting as poetry. At least the feeling for the former art subsists both in his life and in his work. With an observant eye for such traits as painters notice and a strong faculty of visualization, he produces pictures of nature as perfect, perhaps, as the pictorial properties of language will allow. Sometimes it is only a series of impressions that he gives, or an impression here and there in a poem of sentiment; and sometimes, as in *The Prairies*, it is a series of complete compositions. But always the method and the spirit are the same, and the intention rarely goes farther than the achievement of this artistic effect.

If, however, it is with the eye of an artist that Bryant sees nature, it is with the feelings of a Puritan. The form under which natural beauty presents itself to Bryant is moral beauty, and the grandeur of his New England hillsides always takes on through his vision something of the moral sublime. By virtue of a species of Platonism inherent in his Puritan ideals,

everything that is lovely and gracious and elevating in the external world presents itself in association with the ideas of purity and holiness. Even when he writes of love, which is not often, there steals into his natural imagery a rare sense of something religious and supernal, as in that freshest and most original of American love lyrics, "*Oh, Fairest of the Rural Maids*" :—

> "The forest depths, by foot unpressed,
> Are not more sinless than thy breast;
> The holy peace, that fills the air
> Of those calm solitudes, is there."

It is this conception of the sinlessness of nature as part of its æsthetic appeal that perhaps marks most deeply the Puritan inspiration of Bryant's poetry. Man brought evil into the world, but nature though sharing the doom of mortality remains undefiled as it came from the hand of its creator. Here God is everywhere revealed in the uncorrupted evidences of His handiwork, and in recognition of this revelation there arises in Bryant's poetry as constant the accompaniment of his most exclusively artistic and even pagan moods, — moods of natural sadness and brooding over death, — a sense of religious sweetness and reverence, of calm and even cheerful acceptance. Though his almost habitual preoccupation with death may cast a shadow over much of his poetry, there is nothing dismal or morbid in his own feelings upon this subject. Nature supplies him with an imaginative symbol of the Christian mystery of immortality. He writes in *June* :

> "I know that I no more should see
> The season's glorious show,
> Nor would its brightness shine for me,
> Nor its wild music flow;

But if, around my place of sleep,
The friends I love should come to weep,
They might not haste to go.
Soft airs, and song, and light, and bloom
Should keep them lingering by my tomb.

"These to their softened hearts should bear
The thought of what has been,
And speak of one who cannot share
The gladness of the scene;
Whose part in all the pomp that fills
The circuit of the summer hills,
Is that his grave is green;
And deeply would their hearts rejoice
To hear again his living voice."

Thus there is in his poetry that which is needed to afford relief to the darker and more forbidding side of Puritanism as expressed in Hawthorne's prose romances. Conscience gave to life in the Massachusetts colonies a grim seriousness. But underneath the stern exterior there must have been the warmth and glow of some more spiritual sentiment without which the representation of life, even of Puritan life, is lacking in imaginative reality.

The influence of Puritanism affects the imaginative form as well as the spiritual expression of Bryant's verse. As we have seen, he was early made familiar with the imagery of Hebrew poetry, and its effect on his descriptions of New England landscape scenery is to give it a sense of something elemental such as we feel in the Biblical phrase "the everlasting hills." A modern school of poetry sees in the imagination merely the operation of memory. And, indeed, it does seem as if in Bryant's verse we are stirred by a dim and

haunting recollection of the early world. The experiences which we share in his contact with nature are almost mystical in their primal simplicity. There is something sacramental in the mood of *The Waterfowl* that overweighs the sense of place and circumstance. It is no longer necessarily a New England landscape on which we are looking. We seem to see for the first time the terrifying splendour of the setting sun before men knew the miracle of recurring days, and to receive, in the flight across the horizon of the solitary bird, a sudden and mysterious assurance of the benign providence of the spirit of the universe.

There are other moods in Bryant, — moods of gentle and dispassionate delight in the softer and more suave manifestations of natural beauty. The poet wanders pensively along the river-bank, or listens with rapt attention to the rain. He notes the song of birds and the forms and colours of flowers. He watches nature's processes, and, as in *The Planting of the Apple-Tree*, he participates in the rites of husbandry with such simple pleasure as if he were employed in some good act of piety. But in all these moods there is the same idyllic and arcadian sense of a young world and of a nature that has not yet lost its religious meaning for the sensitive and innocent spirit.

It is this sentiment that sets Bryant off most surely from other nature poets in our age and in his own. To find a parallel for the freshness of his delight in the outward world, unsullied by the shadows of an excessive subjectivity, for the exquisite art and unfailing response of his fancy to every new perception of fleeting form and colour, and, above all, for that instinct of primitive worship which turns all nature into symbols of divine good-

ness and beauty, we must go back of Wordsworth and the rest with whom he is most often compared, back, for example, to that other Puritan poet of earlier time and first of modern English nature poets, Andrew Marvell, whose *Bermudas* is the *aubade* of Bryant's muse of the New World. There is the ocean between the ordered beauty of the lawns of Appleton House and the wild majesty of Bryant's rocky hills and rolling prairies to which he knows so well how to respond with something of elemental grandeur in the sweep and music of his verse itself. But there is a sympathy between these two spirits that is felt in a common intensity of exaltation before the altars of their divine mistress, nature. And somehow, too, whether it is the result of his classical studies in his youth, or of a more fundamental and deep-lying kinship, Bryant seems even to summon up voices of a more ancient poetry, solemn and oracular in the deep forest shades, pensive and pastoral on the sunny slopes. The pagan strain that we have found in Bryant echoes Virgil no less than Lucretius. In his love of all things beautiful, in his religious regard for nature, as well as in the pervasive sadness of the tears of things which interpenetrates his verse, the poet of New England is not so remote from the Mantuan as from many of the poets of his own day. His poetical acceptance of those traditional feelings concerning nature which formed part of the inherited religion of his race, even while his mind was weaned from the orthodox dogmas of its belief, is like Virgil's also. It is not so much that he consciously employed these as poetic material, as that they were in his blood and fused inseparably with the stir of a life within him that was older than his own indi-

vidual life. Hence the primitiveness of piety in much of his verse, its elemental quality. The suppliancy with which he bows before those mighty powers of the universe in which the divine presence is revealed, is not reasoned, but instinctive. Thus it mirrors the primal religious mood of mankind and gives it through art a new hold upon the spirit.

It is fitting that the love of nature should have been so expressed by the first American poet. Our racial consciousness is necessarily lacking in a reminiscence of that remote past when faith in things eternal first took form in beautiful mythologies and legends of gods and heroes. But in Bryant there is present something of the mood out of which such things spring, and he supplies, in his feeling toward nature, a little of that pristine freshness of delight in all created things, and even more of that pristine poignancy of regret at the briefness of their span, which is needed to give spiritual perspective to our literature.

Bryant may not be a great poet, — though when we have lost that impatience with minor poets which is still a sign of national crudity and provincialism, this will weigh less heavily against him, — but he marked as we would have had him mark it, the first growth of imaginative self-consciousness in America. It was the wilderness that called Europe to the Western World, and Bryant has caught the sentiment of the wilderness and preserved some memory of what it meant for those who came to find in it a refuge and a holy tabernacle.

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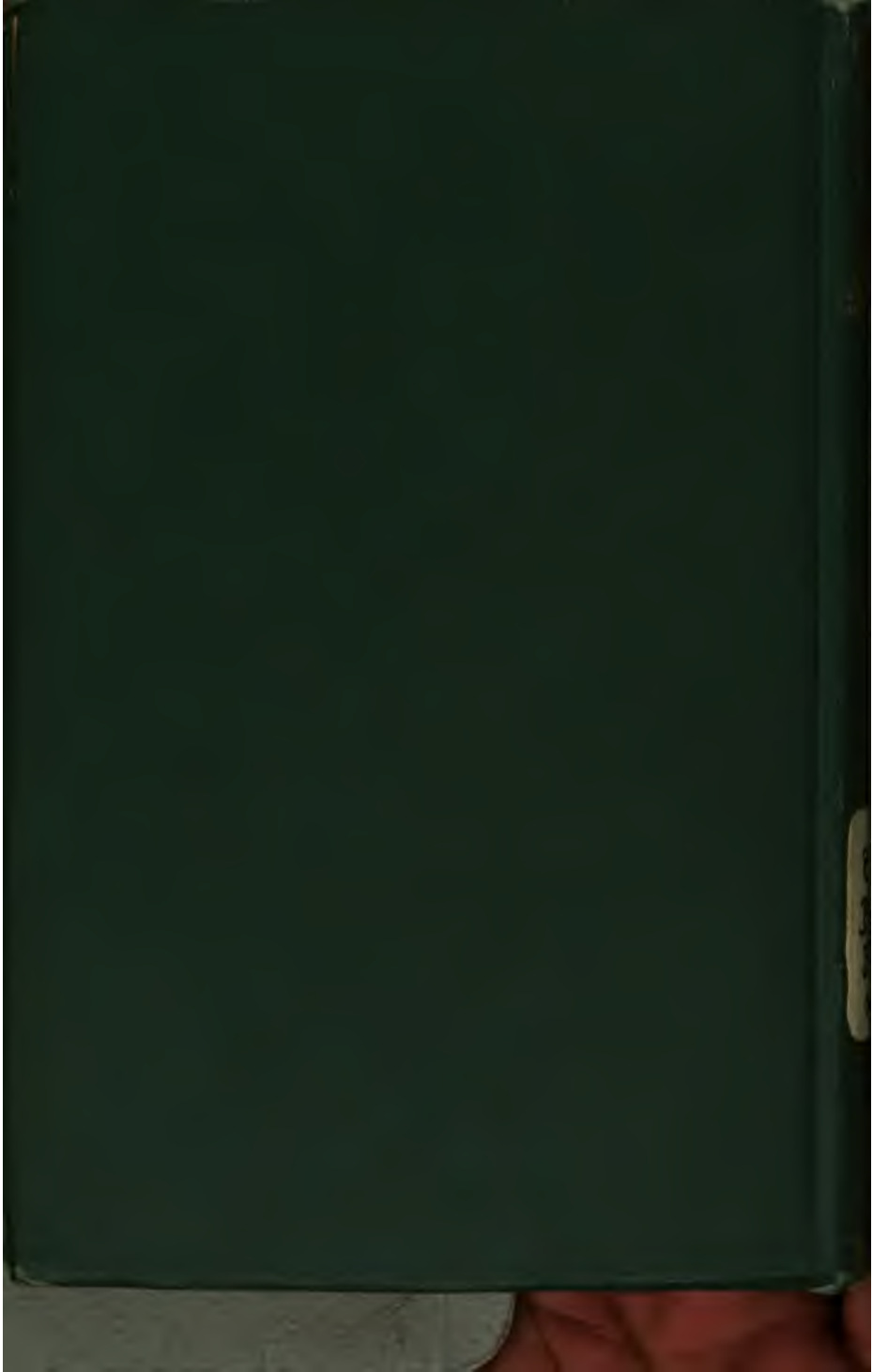
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